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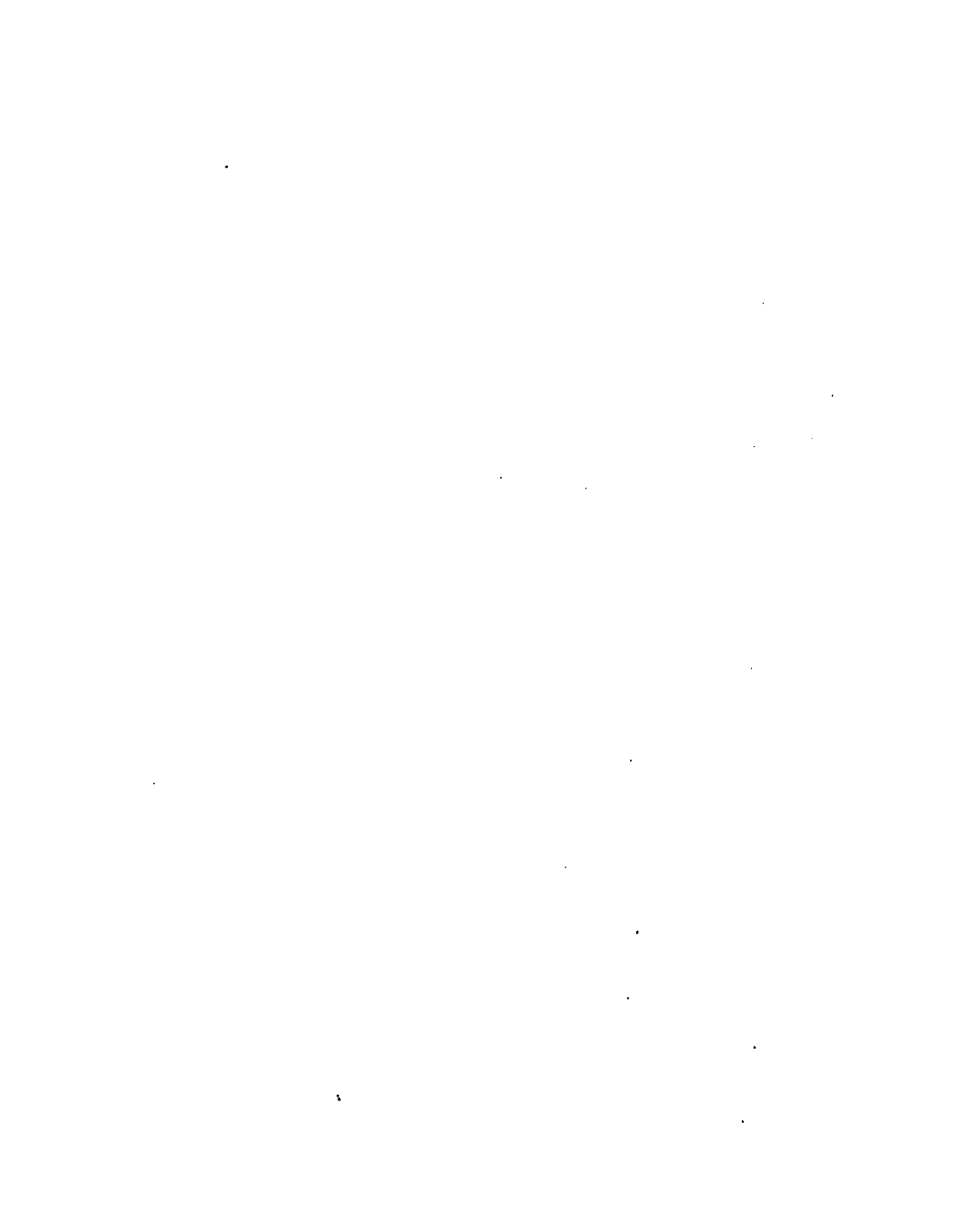
LOVE AND TWENTY

Tolu Strange writes.

Author of
"BOOTLES' BABY"

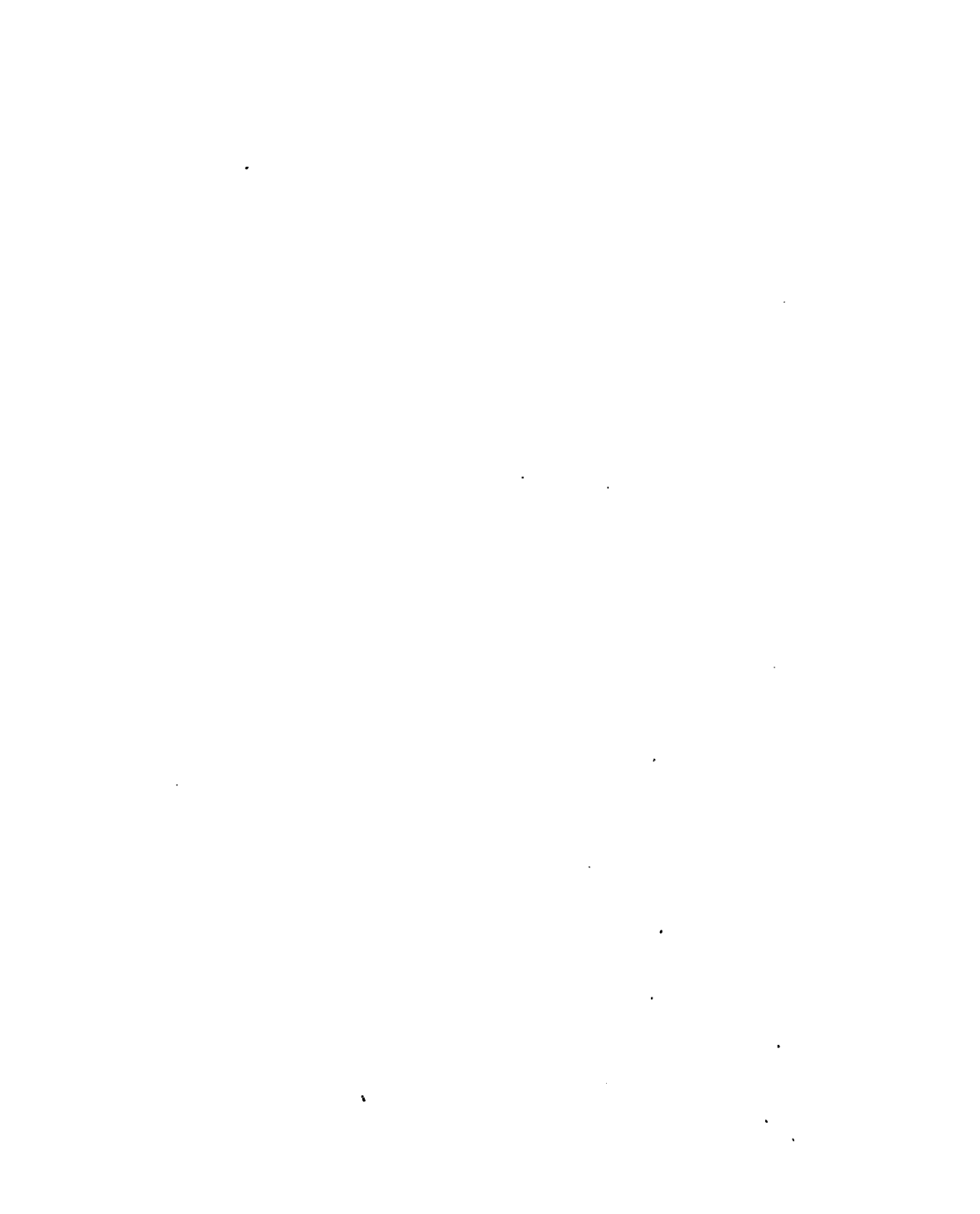
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Love and Twenty.

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Love and Twenty

By

John Strange Winter

Author of "Bootles' Baby," etc.



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A SPRAY OF SYRINGA

"Syringa means Memory."

CHAPTER I.—BUD AND BLIGHT

IT was a murky February night. Outside the great entrance doors of the Assembly Rooms at Blankhampton a guard of mounted soldiers, enveloped in their long cloaks and carrying torches whose lights were reflected in their burnished helmets, showed that something unusual was on foot. As a matter of fact, the officers of the regiment then quartered in Blankhampton barracks were giving their annual ball, and a long line of carriages bringing the fair, the lovely and the gallant to take part in the festivities stretched as far as the eye could see, which was not, by-the-bye, such a very long way, for no streets in Blankhampton are arranged in long lines, but turn and twist this way and that in what to a stranger's eye seems inextricable confusion.

I have said elsewhere that Blankhampton Assembly Rooms are about the best ballrooms to be found in the country. They never look so well as they do for a soldiers' ball, when their beauty

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and size and richness of colour are greatly enhanced by military trophies and decorations, by guards of picked soldiers in full dress, by resplendent uniforms, vast displays of flowers, and the gathering together of all the feminine loveliness to be found within the borders of Blankshire. On this occasion everybody was agreed that the 18th Royal Dragoons had outshone not only their own efforts of the previous year, but the efforts of every ball which had been given by their predecessors.

The evening was as yet young. The long row of officers on the left of the entrance to the ballroom was still unbroken ; the Colonel was hard at work opposite to them receiving the incoming guests. To me, this part of such an entertainment is always highly interesting as affording an indication of character and of the age and probable length of service of each individual of that brilliant line. You have the seniors, who have given up dancing and who stand stiffly and as a matter of duty ; you see men a few years younger eagerly looking out for some special face ; you find those younger still as eagerly looking out for everybody that they know ; and you find the youngest of all affecting an utter indifference, as if the whole thing were the greatest bore in the world.

One of these last, however, was not so indifferent as his several companions. He was standing, hands behind him, like all the others, between a youngster of six months' service and a man who stood nearly at the top of the list of lieutenants, and his conversation might be fairly rendered as being something like this—"Ah, there's Lady Margaret and Miss Adair! How handsome she is looking to-night!

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What do you say, Staunton? You think her the handsomest girl in Blankhampton? So do I. I don't think there is anybody in Blankhampton to compare with her. How do you do, Lady Margaret? How do you do, Miss Adair? What do you say, Figgs?" as the ladies passed on. "Deuced heavy to dance with? That's as may be. I never danced with her. Oh, there is Lady Vivian! What a party she has brought with her! Who is the girl in white? How do you do, Lady Vivian? You are in good time. Has Sir Thomas shirked it? Ah, I thought he would. What do you say, Staunton? Good job, too? Well, there's something in that. By Jove, who is this wonderful apparition, Figgs? Who is this, do you know? Oh, Miss Vandeleur. And who is Miss Vandeleur when she's at home? Nobody seems to know her. By Jove, I wonder where she got that frock! There's something queer about her, eh? There's Mrs Chirley Daniels and her sister coming, and right back there I just caught a glimpse of Mrs De Benham. I suppose you will slip out of the ranks now, Figgs, eh?"

So the idle and desultory chatter went on until at length there was something of a lull in the stream of arrivals.

"Who's that?" said Darley, suddenly jogging at the elbow of his senior, Staunton.

Staunton, who had been looking down the ball-room, turned his eyes towards the doorway with a start. "Oh, that's Mrs Ronald Gaskyll, you know. She lives at Dorrington Manor. Awfully nice people! Don't you know them?"

"Never saw them before. Is that her sister or her daughter with her?"

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"Ah, that I cannot tell you. No, she has no daughter—may be a sister. I am not sure."

"Do you know her?" Darley persisted.

"I know Mrs Gaskyll—yes."

"I wish you would introduce me to her presently."

"I will, my dear chap, with the greatest of pleasure, but, at the same time, you had better look out what you are doing there. Old Gaskyll is a fire-eating sort of chap, a good bit her senior, and he is reputed to be more than inclined to be jealous. Just give you the tip, you know."

"Oh—yes—but it's the younger lady I want to talk to."

"Oh, I see," said Staunton, comprehensively.

After this they did not stand very much longer by the doorway. Staunton saw the lady whom he most admired at that time pass into the ballroom, and then quietly slipped out of the ranks, joined a moment later by Ralph Darley.

"I say, old chap, you'll introduce me to that Mrs Gaskyll, won't you?"

"Oh, yes, she is over there. Let me do it now."

So the two soldiers clattered across the polished floor together and Staunton presented his comrade to the lady whom he was so anxious to know. In common politeness he was obliged to talk to her a little and to ask her for a dance. Then she in turn presented him to Miss Joan Hastings, who was, as she told him, staying with her and had, indeed, come on purpose to be present at this ball. Miss Hastings, Ralph Darley secured for the waltz which was just about to begin, and as Mrs Gaskyll turned to speak to two other men who came up at that moment, he drew her away in the direction of that

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part of the room in which the dance was to take place. She was very young, very pretty and very artless. It seemed to him that in the course of that dance and the next—which they sat out, more from a sense of taking the chance when it comes than from a desire not to outrage the proprieties—that she told him all her history, her simple history. First, that her mother was dead, that she could not remember her; then that her father had a place about thirty miles from London, that she had no brothers or sisters, that she had been presented the previous year and had had a very good season in Town under the chaperonage of her aunt, Lady Henry Beaurivage. “She is my aunt, you know; she and my mother were sisters,” she told him. She was beautifully dressed, wore some fine pearls and danced perfectly. She had a pale little face, grey eyes put in with a dirty finger, a quantity of light brown hair, a straight little nose, a rounded chin, and a sweet mouth with a dimple at one side of it. Everybody asked who she was. It seemed to Darley that all the men wanted to dance with her, and, as a matter of fact, she was quite the success of the evening. He was careful to secure his own dances, more in number than I care to tell of. They were very discreet—or, to be quite correct, he was—they danced a little and they sat out a great deal, which is a way that young people have of throwing dust in Mrs Grundy’s eyes. Certain it is that Mrs Gaskyll took her charge away in the small hours of the morning feeling that she had done very well, that she had behaved beautifully, and, moreover, had been no trouble to her.

As for Ralph Darley, he went home to his quarters—well, not treading upon air, because, as a matter

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of fact, he went along with several others in a four-wheel cab of rickety construction—but when at last he found himself in the sanctity of his own room, he sat down despite the fact that it was a very cold night and that the fire had gone out, to think over the girl who had just come into his life, the girl who was to be the guiding star of his future, the beacon-light which would lead him through all evil to all good, the girl who was to be the one woman that for him henceforward the world would hold. It was a new reading of the old story—"A love eternal in a moment's space conceived." He was very young, and he flung himself into the passion of the moment with all the violent tempestuousness of youth. It would have been more sensible to have got into bed at once and to have gone to sleep and slept until his servant came to rouse him in the morning; but there was nothing sensible about Ralph Darley that night. He lighted a very big pipe and he sat in a big chair and thought bright, vivid, glorified thoughts about the girl called Joan Hastings until the dim, wan daylight began to steal in through the blindless windows and he became conscious with a start that he was cold and stiff and that it was high time he got into bed. But even then he did not sleep soundly. He dreamed of her again and again, fancied that he was following her through a morass, and that somehow he found himself out on the Goodwin Sands just as they were beginning to churn themselves from a firm yellow foothold into a quagmire from which there is no escape; and then he woke up with a start to find that he was safe and sound in his own quarters, and that Grub, his servant, was just setting a cup of tea on the chair by his bedside

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with the additional information that it only wanted half an hour to officers' call.

She was with him all that morning. He thought about her as he was drinking his tea, while he was dressing—to the imminent peril of his chin—while he was scrambling through a hasty breakfast and listening to some strictures from the Colonel on the subject of a pail which had got overturned in the stable the previous evening. He was not so pre-possessed but that he managed to eat a good solid luncheon, having, as I said before, had but a scramble of a breakfast, but he thought about her all the time, and as soon as he was free of his regimental duties he very quickly changed his uniform for plain clothes and went off in a smart dog-cart to call at Dorrington Manor three miles away.

If possible, he thought her more beautiful and found her more delightful in the light of that murky winter day than he had done the previous evening. Her tall and slim young figure was attired in the neatest of tailor-built costumes, she wore no jewellery of any kind, not even a pin in the ruddy-hued tie knotted at her throat, but he did notice that she had one or two rings on her slim young fingers. She was so gay, so bright; she talked over the ball with an almost childish eagerness such as one might have expected of a girl who had never been to a ball in her life before. She entered into all Mrs Gaskyll's plans for the future, showing that she was evidently going to pay her a somewhat long visit. She declared that so far she had enjoyed Blankhampton far more than she had ever enjoyed her season in Town, and after they had had tea, she went up to the piano and sang all the newest songs with a fire and verve which

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made Ralph Darley more hopelessly in love than ever.

Well, this went on for several weeks. Whenever there was no special festivity on hand in the neighbourhood, it became Ralph Darley's habit to spend the afternoon at Dorrington Manor, or perhaps Joan would give him a hint that she and Mrs Gaskyll were going into the town the next afternoon and might be found about five o'clock having tea at the great pastry-cook's in St Thomas's Street. Then instead of driving out to Dorrington he would saunter into the town, look casually into the most likely places for finding two ladies, and eventually carry Miss Hastings off to listen to the music of the Cathedral service from the convenient dimness of the outer courts thereof. And Mrs Gaskyll was the easiest of chaperons. Of a truth, she had her own little affairs on hand, and a young lady to take care of was as convenient to her as it was convenient to the young lady to have an easy chaperon. Somehow, as the days went by, the visits to Dorrington grew less frequent and the prowlings in the town became more a matter of custom, until at last, when one cold afternoon the two had strayed into the dim recesses of the Cathedral nave, Joan told him that she was going home three days later.

"Going home!" he echoed.

"Yes; you see, my father comes home on Saturday and I promised to be there to meet him."

"But you are coming back again?" said Ralph Darley, anxiously.

He could only just see the pure outline of her face, but his quick ears caught the echo of a soft little sigh.

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"Mr Darley," she said, in a trembling voice, "I don't believe I shall ever come back again."

"Oh, but you must. You must know what your going away means to me. You are everything in the world to me, Joan. You must have seen it. You must have known it."

"Oh, no, no, don't say that!" she cried, with a suspicious flutter in her voice.

"But you must have known it," he persisted; "you would not mind coming back here for as long as we are here, would you? You—you know what I mean—you won't make me wretched—you will make me the happiest fellow in all the world, won't you, Joan?" And then he added, with all his boyish and generous heart in his eyes, "I'm so awfully in love with you, I scarcely know how to tell you so."

She shrank a little away from him, then looked up at him with an expression in her eyes which he had never seen there. "Do you know," she said, "I swear to you I had no idea you were going to say anything of this kind to me. I have enjoyed these last few weeks, oh, so much—I could never tell you how much—but I had no idea that you were serious—or are you only making fun of me? Please don't, because I should hate to go away and feel that I had hurt you—wounded you."

"Hurt me, wounded me! To go away! Why, what do you mean?"

"Oh," she said, her voice breaking again, "you will believe me, won't you! I—I never thought of this. I thought it was only a little fun, just to pass the time. I would have killed myself rather than have let you say what you said to me just now! Oh, I am so sorry."

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"But why need you be sorry? It is all quite simple. I will go and see your father, and I am very well off, I have a good record. I am young, so are you. What is that? It will mend every day of it."

"It's no use your going to see my father," said Joan Hastings, in an odd kind of voice.

"No use. Why not?"

"Because—because—I hardly know how to tell you—because I am going to be married next month."

CHAPTER II.—A SPRAY OF SYRINGA

LITTLE by little, in the dark recesses of that great Cathedral fane, Ralph Darley drew from Joan Hastings the story of her engagement to another. He inferred rather than actually heard from her that Lady Henry Beaurivage had presented her niece and introduced her into very smart and exclusive society with one sole aim and object, that of marrying her soon and well. It happened to be a season in which there were not many particularly brilliant matches going begging, and when towards the end of July, Joan received an offer from a very dignified and highly-respected baronet of large means, the idea of refusing it had never presented itself to her because any such idea had been tacitly tabooed from the very first.

The proposal was made in the first instance to Lady Henry herself, not to Joan. Lady Henry undertook, having already given her blessing and having also pledged her brother-in-law to the same ratification, to break the news to her niece. She did it in this wise—"My dear Joan, I have some very important news to tell you. Sir William

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Robinson, who is the fifth baronet and whom I know you admire immensely, has done you the honour to make you an offer of marriage. Now you are very young, and certainly you are very pretty, but for a girl who will not have a large fortune I really do think you the most lucky young woman that it has been my pleasure to know for a long time. Of course, I told him that I knew you would be delighted—well, I didn't tell him that, my dear, I told him that I knew you were not thinking of anybody else, and that I fancied you had a sort of liking for him. He is coming at three o'clock and will see you alone. Of course, he will want to fix a day, but that can stand by until your father has talked settlements over with him. I should say not before the end of October," Lady Henry said in her loftiest accents, "I never believe in marriages being rushed. There is always a degree of indecency about great haste, as if one was not sure of the man, don't you know, or something horrid of that kind. Of course, I shall give you the best part of your trousseau, and I think I shall give you that turquoise and diamond tiara that you are so fond of. It will suit you very well, and with your height you can carry it off."

And somehow Joan had found herself rushed into this marriage with a man whom she liked fairly well, but for whom she had not the smallest love such as young girls do and should have towards the man with whom they are to pass the rest of their lives. Sir William was a well-preserved man of say eight-and-forty. He was highly dignified, intensely respectable, enormously wealthy, and possessed of an idea that it was high time he should marry and

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settle down. Joan's *naïveté* and unspoiled freshness charmed him as nothing else would have been likely to do. He admired her very much. He thought that she would look well at the head of his table, that she would look equally well in his family diamonds, that she would be an amusing companion, and that her frankness of character would render her a very trustworthy and charming wife. Deeper feelings than these he did not possess. He proposed to her in due form and was accepted, not exactly willingly, but more from a feeling that she had got into a certain current and that she had practically no choice but to let herself float the way the stream flowed.

The engagement was blazoned in all the journals of the day, and the marriage of the beautiful Miss Hastings, one of the season's *débutantes*, and the wealthy baronet was fixed to take place at the end of November, a month later than Lady Henry had suggested. Unfortunately, about the middle of the month Sir William was so unlucky as to meet with a very severe accident. It was nothing out of the ordinary run of accidents, merely a big smash in the hunting field with a broken leg and several broken ribs, but for weeks he lay very dangerously ill and all idea of being married at present was put entirely out of the question. As soon as he was able to be moved, his doctor sent him off to Egypt for the rest of the winter, and thither, by slow stages, he went, accompanied by his *fiancée's* father, Mr Hastings. Mr Hastings had suggested that Joan should go with them, but Sir William himself had vetoed this idea promptly and with much decision—"No, my dear fellow, I am feeling so ill and so irritable I'd rather

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not take the little girl with us. I might frighten her. I am not an irritable man in a general way, and if it was not for the horrid pain in my side I don't believe I should be irritable now, but I am, and there's no getting over it. Now Jones, who has been with me fourteen years, is used to my ways and just knows what my irritability is worth, and if I let out on him he is none the worse for it. If I let out on you, you will bear in mind, won't you, that I have had a smash enough to upset the nature of any man? No, let Joan go off on her visits, and let her have as nice a time as she can until we come back again; but don't take her with us, I couldn't stand it."

So it had come about that Joan was free to pay several visits before her father's return, of which that to Mrs Gaskyll stood the last on the list. Well, she ought to have told everybody that she was engaged to be married, but on her arrival at Dorrington Manor she had asked Mrs Gaskyll so earnestly not to speak of it that her hostess had complied with her request. "You see, it is so tiresome people asking every day how Sir William is, and if I have heard from him. I assure you that the De Berrys made my life a perfect burden to me. As if I carried the poor thing's ribs about with me to take out and show them! And they wanted to know if I felt as though I should die when it happened, and if I was going to give up dancing while Sir William was away, and if I wasn't longing to see him again, and altogether I had a ghastly time; and Sir William didn't want me to have a ghastly time. He told me to enjoy myself."

"Well, my dear, I don't see why you should not."

"No, that is what I feel," Joan continued. "Of course, I was awfully sorry when he got smashed up

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and broke his ribs and all that, and I did everything I possibly could for him, but it's no use saying that I cried all night, you know, because I didn't. I should have been awfully sorry if he had died—awfully sorry, and really, you know, I am quite fond of Sir William, but I don't want to give up dancing because I am going to be married by-and-by. Married people don't give up dancing; why should I?"

"No, indeed," said Mrs Gaskyll, and so it was arranged between them that nothing should be said as to Joan's engagement, and as Mrs Gaskyll happened to have a little affair of her own on hand—a mere flirtation, you know, an idle pass-the-time with nothing serious in it—coupled with the indisputable fact of an extremely jealous husband, she was very well content that Joan should be having a little affair on hand at the same time.

And now her reticence, natural enough, perhaps, in so young a girl, recoiled with stunning force upon the head of the man whom she liked better than any man whom she had seen in her life before. They parted that day in the dim courts of the splendid fane and did not meet again. It never occurred to Darley to ask her to break her engagement; it never occurred to Joan Hastings that she had the power to do so. She told him that she liked him, but she gave him no idea that she was seriously in love with him. Of a truth, she did not as yet know herself that it was so.

On the appointed day she returned home so as to be in readiness when her father returned from his journey. He arrived in the highest of spirits, full of the latest news of Sir William, which he detailed to

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his daughter with the evident idea that she was dying to hear everything about him. "I assure you, Joan," he remarked during dinner that evening, "that Cairo is the most wonderful place I have ever been in in my life. Sir William is quite like a new man, and I told him the day before I came away that really he will have cause to bless the day that he smashed himself up as he did, for it seems to have positively rejuvenated him! He looks ten years younger at least."

"And he is coming back—when?" Joan asked.

"Three weeks to-day, and he begs that you will make all your preparations and have as little to do as you can during the week that he will be in England. I suppose you are quite decided to go to Monte Carlo for your honeymoon?"

"Oh, yes, I think so," said Joan, listlessly.

But Mr Hastings noticed nothing. He thought his daughter was a little dull, and not being a very far-sighted man, set it down to the mere fact of Sir William being absent. He was very blind, as many fathers are. However, Joan was not dull for long. She had no time to be dull. The following day she went up to Town to stay with Lady Henry, and then there was much driving to and fro, many consultations, and long mornings spent in West End shops. Most of her trousseau had been prepared before Sir William's accident, including the all-important wedding-gown. That had only to be touched here and there so as to bring it quite up to the date of the latest fashion, but during the winter Joan had very wisely used a good many of her evening gowns, and they needed to be replenished. Yes, she was very busy, and if at times there was a gnawing at her

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heart—as there was—she had no leisure to think much about it. She felt somehow that all would come right when once she was married, she would forget any little fancies that she might have had. She was more sorry for him than for herself. He had seemed so crestfallen, so cast down, so crushed during that last sad conversation of theirs in Blankhampton Cathedral. And then in due course Sir William came home, bringing her many presents from Cairo, taking her here and there, until her young life seemed like a whirlwind.

And then they were married. Ralph Darley saw the announcement in the papers, and setting his teeth hard determined that he would, if he tore his very heart up by the roots, forget her. And yet with the strange inconsistency which moves mankind, there might have been seen among Lady Robinson's wedding presents a beautiful fan of ivory and silk on which was painted her Christian name and a long spray of syringa. This present reached her a few days after the wedding and was sent without a word to indicate the name of the giver. It happened that Joan did not receive it until after her return from Monaco; it happened also that Lady Henry was present when she opened the parcel. "Oh, what a lovely fan, with my name and such exquisite flowers! What are they? Why, surely they are syringa blossoms!"

"And syringa," said Lady Henry, significantly, "means memory."

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CHAPTER III.—BLOOM IN THE DESERT

IF I were to say that Joan was unhappy in her marriage I should be wrong. In truth, Sir William was everything that was kind and good and considerate—a little too kind, a little too good, a little too considerate. There were times when the smooth, tame, conventional and rather humdrum life palled upon Joan and irritated her, when she would have liked him to forbid her to do something, when she would have been better satisfied if he had been anything but what he was. Sir William was really a very good-tempered man, a man who for years had kept his natural temper completely under control. Nothing would have annoyed him so much as to know that he had betrayed himself into excessive irritability towards his young wife, and nothing would have astonished him so much as to know that she would really have preferred him to be less easily smooth and regular than he was. She knew that she ought to be very happy, she knew that she had everything that the heart of any girl could desire, that her position was secure, her place in the world fixed, her smallest wish—within the bounds of possibility, that is—sure to be gratified ; but in spite of her wealth, her diamonds, her rank, Joan had always a gnawing sense of dissatisfaction and unrest, a feeling that she had missed the best of life, a dim sort of idea that she was too young, too childish for this quiet, middle-aged, good-tempered husband of hers. She scarcely put the idea into words to herself. She did not exactly regret Ralph Darley, but she was

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possessed of an uneasy sense of unrest when she thought of him, and the beautiful fan with her Christian name and a spray of syringa painted upon it lay still in its wrappings of tissue paper and had never been used. She looked at it sometimes—"Aunt Henry said syringa means memory," she thought. "He sent it. What did he mean? That he would remember me or that I should remember him?" And then a wild wish that everything had been different would rise up in her mind to be crushed down as one of the impossibilities for which it was no use wishing.

So life went on until nearly a year had gone by since Joan Hastings had become Lady Robinson. Then there came a little baby into the smooth running household, a tiny girl-child, her mother's counterpart, who created more confusion, who upset daily ways and habits more entirely, who created more fuss than had been made at any time in that establishment since the day when Sir William was carried home with his leg and half of his ribs broken. And this little person was named Meta. Her coming made all the difference in the young mother's life. The child was as a bloom in the desert, a bloom tender, beautiful, lovely and full of hope in an arid desert of unsatisfied longing and vague unrest and extreme loneliness. She never felt that she was anything beyond a pet and a plaything, a figure-head, a doll to Sir William, but, to this rose-tinted little fragment of humanity she was the whole world. In a single hour all those vague sensations of unrest seemed to be lulled to sleep; she lived, moved, breathed and had her being in that little child, and the fact that the advent of a girl had been

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a deep disappointment to her father only served to make Joan more passionately devoted a mother. And as time went on this feeling increased, for no other child came to fill the spacious nurseries which had been got ready for the heir, and when little Meta was nine years old Sir William quietly faded out of existence, leaving to his child all the property he could dispose of, while the title and principal estates went to his nephew.

Joan was very much distressed for a time. She wore the deepest of widow's weeds, and walked to her husband's grave every day between that of the funeral and that of her departure some weeks later from Temple Rest. Everybody said that she was most devoted, and so indeed she thought herself; but, at the same time, she was only just eight-and-twenty. She was much handsomer than she had been at eighteen, and still had the same charm of glance and manner, the same slender beauty of form, the same almost childish frankness of disposition, and it must be confessed she took great interest in her weeds, that she really unconsciously admired herself in the distinctive garb.

Then they left Temple Rest and went to London, where they established themselves in a charming house, and for a time at least Lady Robinson devoted herself entirely to the care and education of her only child. And gradually she relaxed her mourning and began to go about again, to run down to the seaside for a few days, to go over to Paris for a fortnight, and, in short, to live the life which most women of youth and wealth are enabled to do. So year after year went by until Meta had reached and passed her seventeenth birthday, and in the early spring follow-

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ing she was presented and made her *début* as a fashionable young lady. Years and years before this Lady Robinson had cast aside all semblance of widowhood. She was still quite young enough to look like her child's elder sister, and as she frequently wore white, and Meta always did, they were often mistaken for such.

It happened one evening that they were going to a particularly smart dance in Cadogan Square. Both mother and daughter were dressed in white, and save that Joan wore diamonds and Meta pearls there was not much distinction between them. They were, indeed, the same pearls which Joan had worn on that memorable night when she and Ralph Darley had first met. She had given them to Meta for her presentation gift, and the child had worn them always since that day. Both mother and daughter had many admirers at this particular dance; indeed, when they arrived there were some half-dozen men who knew that they were coming, waiting to secure dances. In the flush of her welcome Joan never noticed a tall, soldierly man standing not very far from the lady of the house, watching the different guests ascending the wide stairs. She passed into the room where dancing was going on, and having seen Meta whirled away, was a moment later herself gliding round with one of her most patient adorers.

But presently she did notice this man—tall, and unmistakably bronzed with the heats of many Indian suns. She looked at him with a vague sense of recognition, saw that her hostess was taking him evidently to introduce to someone, then saw him presented to Meta. She saw from Meta's face, every expression of which she knew as one knows

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how to read a book, that the child was greatly impressed by him; she noticed the courtesy of every movement and gesture. "How like Ralph Darley!" her thoughts ran. Then somebody came to claim her, and she was obliged to turn away. Presently Joan saw that her child was dancing with this stranger, and when the strains of music ceased, and the dance came to an end, she by some chance found herself quite near to her. "Oh, mother," said Meta, perceiving that they were close together, "let me introduce Colonel Darley to you. This is my mother," she said, turning to him, "and if you wish to be a little complimentary you will say, 'Not your mother, your sister.' That is what nine men out of ten say to us; do they not, mother?"

"But I think," said Joan, "that Colonel Darley knows very well that I am not your sister. We used to know each other years ago."

"Many years ago," said Colonel Darley, taking the hand which she held out to him.

Joan gave a quick sigh. "Yes, more years ago than we—I like to think of. How is it, I wonder, that we never met before?"

"Well, chiefly," said Colonel Darley, "because I have been eleven years out in India. I was coming home, but I got the command a little unexpectedly, and I had to sacrifice my home leave. We only got back to England a month ago."

"And you liked India?"

"Oh, yes, it was the same to me as any other place."

"And you were—that is—you are married?"

"I have never married," said Colonel Darley.

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"Oh, I see—oh, I see—yes. You think my little daughter very like me?"

"Very like you indeed. The image of what you were when I knew you before. And your husband?"

"My husband has been dead a long time—more than eight years," said Joan, her eyes falling.

"Indeed; I had not heard of it. I beg your pardon. It was very clumsy of me. You see, I have been so long out of the world that I know nothing of what has gone on at home, or next to nothing. Pray forgive me."

"Oh, of course, how should you know? I suppose I don't look much like a widow," she said a little nervously, "but, you see, I have to think of my child. I have to be father and mother to her both. She is so young, and it is better for her to have a young mother than a dowdy one."

"I was not finding any fault with you, Lady Robinson," said Colonel Darley, quietly.

"Oh, no, but I sometimes think people look a little surprised when they hear that I am a widow, but it is for Meta that I go about so much. I have to think of her; she is my only child. I sometimes call her—" and then she broke off short, looked at him for a moment, and then looked away across the maze of gaily-dressed people.

"What do you call her?" asked Colonel Darley.

"Her name is Meta," answered Joan, but the words she had been going to say were—"I sometimes call her my bloom in the desert."

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CHAPTER IV.—AFTER-BLOOM

META was full of their new acquaintance as she and her mother drove home together that night.

"When did you know Colonel Darley, mother?" she asked.

"Oh, years ago—years ago," Joan answered.

"Before you were married?"

"Yes."

"When you were only about as old as I am?"

"Just about the same age, dear."

"Ah, he said that I was just like what you used to be," said the girl, unconsciously stabbing her mother's heart with every word. "Were you engaged to my father when you met him?"

"Yes, dear, I was. I met him a very short time before I was married."

"Oh? Very good-looking, isn't he?"

"Is he?" said Lady Robinson, in a non-committing tone.

"Oh, yes, mother, awfully good-looking! And although he pretends to have been so long in India that he is quite at sea and rusty about everything that is happening here he dances divinely—divinely. Didn't you dance with him?"

"No," said Joan, "he didn't ask me. I daresay he thought I was too old to dance."

"Why, he is older than you are!"

"Perhaps."

"He is coming to call," Meta went on.

"Yes, he told me that you had given him permission."

"Well, I didn't give him permission, mother; I

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told him that I was sure you would be very pleased to see him."

"I? Why should I be very pleased to see him?"

"Well, that is always what I say to men who ask if they may call. It is the proper thing."

"Yes—perhaps it is. It was a nice dance, wasn't it, dear?"

"Oh, a delightful dance, mother. I have not enjoyed a dance so much before."

Joan's heart went down with a rush. "She hadn't enjoyed a dance so much before!" Like a flash of lightning her mind went back over the many dances to which she had taken her girl—dances in comparison with which this night's entertainment, smart and pleasant as it had been, was as nothing—simply nothing. Surely Meta was not going to fall in love with this man as her mother had done before her! Surely this man was not going to fall in love with Meta! Well, you know when the mind fears something how readily it sees the first signs of that something being about to happen. It is the same to-day as it was in the poet's time.

"Trifles light as air
Are to the jealous confirmation strong,
As proofs of holy writ."

She was not jealous, but she was full of fear upon the point. She went to bed as usual, but she never closed her eyes during the whole of that night; and when her maid came with her letters and her morning tea, Lady Robinson was lying wide awake, still thinking—thinking what she should do if it happened that Meta and Ralph Darley should be attracted one to the other. "It would be dreadful!"

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her thoughts ran, as she took her letters; "it would be dreadful! What should I do?" She quite thought that she cared little or nothing about him herself. She had not forgotten him, she had often called him to mind since the days of her vaguely unrestful wifehood; she had not pined after him ever, but there had always been in her life that sense of something wanting—that sense of having missed something which should come into the lives of all women and men.

It was the beginning of a period of living agony to her. She was, as I think I have said before, a very good mother. She would have sacrificed herself at any moment—body and soul—for the child whom she called her bloom in the desert; and yet, as the days wore on and he seemed to have pervaded their whole life—they met him everywhere, and he was continually in and out of the pretty house in Hans Place—all the old love so early blighted came back to her with tenfold force. It was terrible to her to see him day after day joining in all Meta's frank and innocent fun; while she, his junior by three years, felt old as grandmother and utterly out of it. It was terrible to the mother to see her only child brighten up when he approached, and receive him with what to her seemed every sign of approval. And yet, Joan was a thorough woman. Day by day, hour by hour did she trample upon her own inclinations, her own desires, her own wishes, with firm and unfaltering feet. Day by day did she take her heart, full of pain and a wild regret of that by-gone past, and thrust it remorselessly away so that it should not show to the world what it suffered. She felt that she could not reasonably object to Colonel

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Darley as a lover for her child. She herself had married a much older man than he was. He was an eminently attractive man, blessed with the best of health and no small share of this world's goods. Meta was an heiress, Meta was very pretty, and if Ralph Darley was the man of her choice, Joan felt that it would not be for her to oppose such a marriage by so much as a single word.

So that gay season wore on. It was an unusually gay one, and as the bright summer days passed by there were so many entertainments of different kinds that to Joan life seemed to be one vast treadmill. But it was Meta's first season. She was young and fresh and strong and exceedingly happy. She wanted to see everything, to go everywhere, to miss nothing, and so they crowded into each day what would have seemed wild gaiety to many people for a week, and all the time Joan went with a smile on her lips—a frozen smile, such as sometimes made Ralph Darley think that she had been very much in love with the dead and gone Sir William, and that life alone had proved a terrible blank to her. He did not know it was, but they got no nearer these two. She was always Meta's mother to him; all his intimacy, all his friendship was with the child—the mother acquiesced, and that was all.

Then suddenly, towards the end of the gay time, that is to say about the beginning of July, a new influence came across their path, a certain Lord St Quinton, who, young, rich, *flattered*, courted and flattered, chanced to meet Joan's girl, and, seeing, fell in love with her. It was the work of a moment, one of those sudden impulses of love, strong and mutual, the love about which there is no mistake in the minds of any

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who are cognisant of it. For a whole fortnight Lord St Quinton was Meta's shadow. Wherever she went he was there also, and at the end of that time he asked her to marry him—and Meta said yes. And then he told Joan what he had done, and asked for her blessing in a way which showed that the possibility of her objecting to him had not presented itself to his mind.

"Are you quite sure that Meta cares for you?" she said, still clinging to the idea that Meta had really loved Ralph Darley.

"I am quite sure, Lady Robinson," said he. "I am as sure as that I love Meta, and you know," looking at her with a smile, "there could be no doubt in the mind of any reasonable person that I am in love with Meta. And of course you will give us your blessing and your consent and all that, won't you?"

"If Meta wishes it, I must," said Joan, speaking quite gravely.

"But you speak as if you object to me."

"Not at all; but I didn't know that Meta was thinking of you in that way. I am taken by surprise. I should like to speak to Meta before I definitely consent to the marriage."

"Oh, of course, as you like about that, but I have no doubt as to what Meta will say."

"No—no, well, if Meta tells me that she wants to marry you, she shall marry you, and I will give you my blessing and my consent, as you wish it. You will, perhaps, come in again by-and-by? Come to dinner. We are dining alone and going to Lady Fitzsimon's dance later on. I suppose you are going there too?"

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"Yes, I am going there. Thank you very much. Eight o'clock?"

"Yes, eight o'clock."

So they parted, and Joan went in search of Meta. She found her in the boudoir. She had seen Lord St Quinton in the morning-room.

"What is this I hear about you, Meta?" Joan asked.

"Oh, dear mother, I am so happy!" cried the girl, catching her mother round the neck and kissing her. "I am so happy! Oh, I am the happiest girl in London. What there can be about me, mother, to make that lovely person want to marry me, I can't think. Isn't he a lovely person?"

"And you want to marry him?"

"Want to marry him! Mother! Why, I am over head and ears, I am madly, desperately, passionately in love with him! I never thought I was going to be in love with anybody, mother. I thought I was as hard-hearted as flint, and—I don't know—the minute he looked at me, it was all over, my heart was like water. I didn't say anything to you, dear, because I thought I should look such a fool if he didn't care for me, but I have been for a whole fortnight aching for him to propose to me. I have really. I wouldn't like to tell anybody else but you, mother, but that is just the truth."

"Well, dear, he has proposed to you, and I told him—"

"You consented, of course, didn't you, mother?"

"Well, I didn't."

"What?"

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"No, I didn't consent because I told him I must talk to you about it first to know that you were really wishing to marry him and in love with him."

"I do wish it. Mother, do you believe that any girl in England—in the world—would refuse him?"

"Well, you may have done. You may have cared for somebody else."

"I? I have never seen anybody but Colonel Darley! Of course, he is a dear—I always told you so, but you never seem to think it—he is too lovely for words, but not to marry. You know, dear, he is too old for me. Now, if he were to marry you—at least, I mean if you were to marry him—it would be quite nice, wouldn't it?"

"My dear Meta!" said Joan.

"There, dear, I beg your pardon. I oughtn't to have said that; but, really, I am so excited and so happy, and so pleased and so proud of myself I don't think I know what I am saying quite and he is so awfully in love with me, and that is the best of it all."

So that matter was settled, and in Joan's mind there only lingered one doubt—what should she say to Ralph Darley? She had years before innocently—yes, yes, quite innocently—out of the very ignorance of her girlishness, wrecked his life. Was hers to be the hand which would deal wreckage a second time? It was almost a certainty that he would come in about five o'clock and stay for half an hour chatting over tea. He had not been the day before; still, it was a certainty that he would appear that day, and she would have to tell him.

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She must get Meta out of the road ; she must send Meta off in the carriage to see someone, or to shop, or something, because she knew Meta was as likely as not to blurt the news out to him in the very gaiety and exuberance of her heart. She would have to tell him herself—she, Joan, who had told him almost the same thing years and years before in the dim recesses of the old Cathedral at Blankhampton. Well, it was unpalatable, but it was a necessity. She had wounded herself so persistently during these last few brilliant weeks, that she never hesitated as to this new phase of pain through which she must go ; and so, when about a quarter to five o'clock Colonel Darley was announced, she received him with a smile which was almost as successful as the smiles which had been the mask for her pain since they had met again. She had already denied herself to any caller but him ; so having seen Meta safely out of the road, she knew that they were secure from interruption.

"Something has happened?" were his first words.

Joan went a shade paler. "Yes," she said, "something very unexpected and serious has happened."

"Something to annoy you?" he asked in a questioning tone.

"Not exactly to annoy me. Under ordinary circumstances, I think I should be very glad, but—but—I am afraid that you will not be pleased."

"I? What has it to do with me?"

She hesitated for a moment. "Colonel Darley," she said, "since we met that night in Cadogan

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Square we have never mentioned the past; but we cannot either of us have forgotten it. I behaved very badly to you, but it was through ignorance, not intentionally; and I would give anything if I had not to tell you what I must tell you now."

"You are—" he began, when his voice failed him, and he looked at her anxiously.

"Meta is going to be married. Of course, I know why you have been coming to my house during these past few weeks, why you have been with us everywhere. I—I quite thought that the child liked you."

"The child? Meta? Your daughter?" he ejaculated.

"Yes, and she is engaged to Lord St Quinton. I would give anything if it were not so."

"Meta is going to marry St Quinton? Why, what is there to object to in that? He is a very good fellow, he is a very good match. I never heard of anybody who didn't like St Quinton!"

"But you?" she asked.

"I? Did you think I was coming to see Meta, that I was wanting to marry Meta, that Meta had any attraction for me? Why, it is too absurd! Who would take a copy when they have once wanted the original? I don't understand you. Is that the bogey that has been keeping me at arm's length all this time, after all these years? My dear Joan, only one woman's picture has filled my heart since you and I met at Blankhampton years—years ago. The first night that we saw each other—you will have forgotten it, I, never—you wore a white gown and you had a curious ornament on one side

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of the bodice. It was a spray of enamelled syringa with diamond dew drops. I shall never forget the tall girl with the syringa on her bosom. Your Meta is only your copy. Syringa means memory, and, with me, memory is faithfulness."

FOR PRINCE CHARMING

THE old city of Clapperton Towers was in a state bordering on frenzy, for H.R.H. Prince Charming of the Mother Country was about to pay it a visit. It happened that royalty was a blessing which did not often shed the light of its countenance over the good people of Clapperton Towers, partly because nothing much ever went on in the place, and partly because once, a long time ago, Her Majesty, the reigning queen of the Mother Country, having honoured it by her presence, afterwards came to hear of certain unseemly disputes as to who should pay for the decorations, and for the very vellum on which was illuminated—"We, your Majesty's most humble and loyal subjects," etc., and declared by her royal word that she would never set foot in the place again.

However, at intervals few and far between, some scion of royalty appeared and, departing, left behind him a tail, flashing brighter and brighter as the years rolled by—a tail of which the links were anecdotes of the royal condescension and favour to certain of the town orphans; you know the kind, my reader, those rich, blatant, fatherless and motherless people, who always seem ambitious of appearing at fancy balls either as their great-grandfathers or as "gentlemen of the Court of Charles the Second," though, as a matter of fact, they would not dream of asking their

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own great-grandfathers, if they could reappear in the flesh, to dinner—while, had they presented themselves, even in all the lustre of their present glory, at the Court of the Merry Monarch, they would promptly have been kicked out of it.

But history repeats itself—fiction was to be placed side by side with truth and royal condescension taxed to the uttermost, for H.R.H. Prince Charming of the Mother Country was really and truly coming, and he was none of your ultra-marine grand dukes, but a real royal highness. The fact was advertised, and largely noised abroad after the manner of travelling conjurors and celebrated trapeze performers.

THE PRINCE IS COMING.

Buy your own and your son's clothes
ready-made at
JOHN SMITH'S!

Local meetings were convened at which local orators spouted of the welcome—the right royal welcome to be given to his Royal 'Ighness—repeating the sweet-sounding words over and over again, as if they tasted better for the new pronunciation. It was wonderful to find how everyone, for months before the great event came off, who had a five minutes' speech to make on any subject, contrived to have a shot at his Royal 'Ighness, from the worshipful the Mayor, who read a neat little speech out of the palm of his hand—for which most people gave the credit of authorship to the Town-Clerk—and "'Oped—'is Royal 'Ighness would—see—wot—a real Shoneshire

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welcome—wos,” to the Canon preaching in turn at the Cathedral on the Sunday previous to the eventful week, who droned out that, “The first act of a royal prince on entering the city will be to attend public worship in this glorious Cathedral”—just as if a royal prince had not the same need to say his prayers as other people.

Well, amongst other tales that go round about the city of Clapperton Towers, there is one to the effect that a perpetual feud is kept up between the Bishop and the Dean.

Now the present spiritual lord of the diocese chances to be a tailor's son, and looks it, every inch of him. The Dean is “aristocrat” from the crown of his handsome head to the soles of his two well-born feet; the Bishop's helpmate is the daughter of a merchant—the Dean's wife the daughter of an earl; the Bishop's daughters are æsthetic and as ugly as sin. The Dean's girl has as lovely a face as ever the eye of man lingered on. I cannot tell whether it be true, but they do say that, in anticipation of the Prince's visit, the Dean, determined not to be done out of doing the honour of his own Cathedral, intimated to H.R.H.'s private secretary that if H.R.H. desired to go over the edifice, arrangements should at once be made for him to do so at his own convenience.

With the frank heartiness which distinguishes the present reigning family of the Mother Country, Prince Charming sent back a reply to the effect that he should much like to be present at a short service in the Cathedral of Clapperton Towers.

“Nothing easier,” the Dean replied. “Private, of course?”

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"Certainly not—public," came back—people *said*—on a post-card.

Public—umph! That meant all the roughs in Clapperton Towers, ten or twelve thousand of them, an unruly, noisy, lawless mob, full to the brim and running over with the true Shoneshire characteristics of manner, cursing, swearing, shoving, fighting their way into the choir—appropriating stall and bench, nay, as likely as not, the very crimson and gold - embroidered desk prepared for H.R.H. himself.

This would never do. Probably H.R.H. would never get into the choir at all, and if he did would probably be asphyxiated, for a crowd of the great unwashed of Clapperton Towers can only be adequately described by the vulgar but expressive Saxon word—stink.

So, as an absolutely public service would never do, the Dean decided that admission must be by ticket, so by ticket admission accordingly was—green for the choir—white for the transepts—pink for the nave. And, oh! the heart-burning those bits of green, white and pink cardboard produced; the people who swaggered about with a white ticket, which meant good standing-room and nothing else, until eclipsed by fortunate possessors of pink ones, eclipsed in turn by the more fortunate holders of the green pass to the inner sanctuary, the holy of holies, where H.R.H. might be stared at for half an hour or more, as if he were nothing more rare than a lord judge or a high sheriff.

And then there was much bitter heart-burning among the seatholders whose seats had to be given up to "the Corporation lot," as they contemptuously

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termed them — “nine-tenths of them Methodists.” And there was even more heart-burning caused by a dozen or so of gentlemen, who flitted about armed with wands, making themselves, in the capacity of stewards, as disagreeable and authoritative as they were helpless in keeping order. But, oh! most fierce heart-burning of all was that between the vicars-choral as to which of them should have the honour of intoning the service.

There are four vicars-choral at Clapperton Towers Cathedral—two married and two single. The Precentor is married but does not get on with his wife, so consoles himself in confessional and sisterhood—the one junior to him is also married and jolly, I had almost written “larky.”

The bachelors make a fitting pair. They are both high—*good* churchmen, they call themselves—and float up and down the stately aisles in flowing cassocks and scanty gowns. They shave themselves very clean, and their hair is combed neatly away after the manner of the Roman priesthood. They gabble all their words one into another, and bow and scrape and grimace, just for all the world like a case of performing monkeys when you drop a penny into the box at the side.

Well, on the occasion of this celebrated service, the Precentor thought seniority ought to have a claim and that he should officiate, but it happened to be the junior's regular week, and he, being greatly disliked of the Precentor, refused to give up his rights. Of the other two, the jolly one was horribly nervous and only too glad to get off it, while the bachelor, though bitterly regretful at his ill-luck, as became a Xtian—yes, he always spelt it so—resigned himself

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to the inevitable. So the junior of all, by name James Braham, won the day.

Now, as a matter of fact, if the Precentor had not been in the regular habit of jibing and jeering and saying every disagreeable thing he could think of at, to and 'about his junior, James Braham would not only have given up his right, but would have said "Thankee" into the bargain. However, as he had firmly stuck to his point and carried it, there was no drawing back possible for him, no shirking his work.

For a whole week he thought of nothing else, neither night nor day. He was a rich young gentleman with quite an Oriental taste for jewellery, and possessed nine-and-twenty valuable rings, which he wore on a pair of exceedingly white and lady-like hands by half a dozen at a time. But he more than once forgot his rings during that memorable week, and when the auspicious morning dawned put on the two plainest of the whole lot.

When he opened his eyes that day, he felt sure he was going to have a sore throat. He was really ill, and had it not been that, did he give in, the Precentor would step in and proudly and unflinchingly go through with the whole business, without so much as a shake in his voice or a turn of a hair, he would have sent off at once for a doctor and been quite too unwell to leave his rooms. However, as the morning wore on, his throat wore off, and only a slight huskiness remained. He gargled with many kinds of gargle, and sucked innumerable jujubes; he did without his pipe all day, lest it should thicken his voice, and finally, about half an hour before the time appointed for the service, he took his sad and melancholy way to the vestry of the Cathedral.

For Prince Charming

What a sight there met his eyes—the place was crammed from end to end. There was my lord Bishop, ponderous and big, swelling with importance; there was the Dean, in full canonicals, striding about with quite a martial air, seeing that everything was right; there was his chum, the other bachelor, wearing his cassock and a belt round his waist, flitting in and out among the throng of ladies, consoling himself with a little mild flirtation.

James Braham got himself into his cassock and looked in the glass—he encountered a face like ashes.

“This won’t do,” he muttered.

He scratched his head, then he looked in the glass again to see if he had disarranged his hair, then he took a turn out of the vestry along the side aisle.

“This won’t do,” he said again, paused, hesitated, spun round on his heel, and made a dash back into the vestry and another dash at his coat.

“I must and will have a pipe,” he said out aloud to the row of coats hanging by the wall, or maybe to the leaded window overlooking the now busy and bustling Cathedral close.

He shut the door and set his pipe alight. He felt better. He puffed a few minutes and felt he didn’t care a little hang for Prince Charming or anybody else.

He pulled a chair up to the window and seated himself thereon, jockey-fashion, looking very rakish, with his long cassock tails lying behind him on the floor, and a very small and filthy clay in his mouth. He had no fear of anyone coming in, for it was the Vicar’s vestry and seldom or never entered by Dean

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or Canons. The two seniors were already robed, and if his brother-bachelor came suddenly in and caught him, why he would understand exactly.

After all, what an ass he had been to deny himself his pipe all the day. Faith, he might well be nervous!

What a good thing his clay, his baccy-pouch and his fusees chanced to be in his pocket and handy; and oh! 'fore George, what a blessed thing a pipe was! How it soothed a fellow! How it comforted him when he was as nervous and as irritable as a woman! What a boon it was to everyone!

He went off then into a train of thought, wondering why women don't go in for it. How many and many a fit of nervousness, of headache, of toothache, of general seediness it would avert. How many a matrimonial breeze it would smooth. He really did not know, if ever he got married—he intended to stick to celibacy, but still, there's no saying—if he should not teach his wife to smoke the very first thing. It would—"

And then the door burst open and Harford, the other bachelor, came in with a rush and began hurriedly pulling on his surplice.

"Prince at the west door," he gasped. "We haven't a minute."

Braham was on his feet in a twinkling, shoved pipe, baccy-pouch and fusee-box into his pocket and dragged his short and light little surplice over his head, slipped on hood and stole and was ready the first of the two.

In haste a procession was formed. The Prince was at the screen a quarter of an hour before his time, and there all the dignitaries, bustling down, met him.

For Prince Charming

No great harm done. He was ushered into his place just behind Braham, and after a moment's delay the service began.

All went smoothly and well. Braham's voice was as clear as a bell, and he slid all his words one into another with such ease and fluency that he was as unintelligible as if he had been intoning Dutch.

All went well. The Prince looked about with interest at clerestory and triforium, at organ and reredos, and everybody looked with interest at him! But all at once the Prince's interest was brought down with a rush from the beauty of stained glass, of carved oak and stone by a fiss—ss—spit—spizz—fiss—spit—fusch—ch—ch—zzzzh!!! just below him in the neighbourhood of the officiating vicar-choral's cassock tails. In an instant there was a great burst of smoke followed by a shoot of flame up the thin lawn surplice, crushed out in as short a time by the strong hands of the jolly athletic parson next to him.

It was all over in a moment, half the people never saw what had happened, though some were quick to note the agony on Braham's face, the glare from the ponderous Bishop, the frown from the Dean, and the exquisite enjoyment on the royal face above the gorgeous velvet and gold-embroidered desk.

It was at this point—Braham having gone bravely on though his voice shook horribly—that the jolly parson turned round and looked at Prince Charming with such a twinkle in his eye, that the royal gravity was done for, he buried his face on his arms behind that blessedly sheltering desk and smothered his laughter as best he could. And thus it was that

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among all the elaborate entertainments provided for the edification of 'Is Royal 'Ighness by the magnates of Clapperton Towers, a little impromptu incident carried off the palm and lived in the royal memory for many and many a day.

A TASTE IN COMMON

IT all began over an old dish. I was there, and I saw it personally. Not being desperately interested in old china, I didn't think much of it; but the two maniacs, whose story I am about to tell you, saw in that hideous blue-and-white dish beauties over which they raved—I can use no other word—until they were absolutely silly.

"Such tone!" said he.

"Such colour!" said she.

"Such depth!" he declared.

"Such pastel!" she murmured.

"Where did you get it, Mr Winter?" said he.

"Oh," I replied vaguely, "it came to me. I had an old aunt who died and left it to me."

"Lucky man! And he doesn't appreciate it one bit," said the girl.

"He doesn't deserve to have it," said the man.

"I don't think I do," I admitted. "Is it a priceless treasure?"

"It's worth a lot of money," said Dynevor, bluntly.

"Oh, I thought it might be worth half a crown or so."

"Half a crown! *Mr Winter!*" cried my other visitor.

"Well, I'm sorry. I haven't any idea of the value of such things. I wouldn't have bought it for any

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money, not even for twopence halfpenny. I have it because it was there, and for no other reason."

"But think of the luck of its being there for somebody who doesn't appreciate it!" she cried.

"Oh, I don't know. I appreciate it in its place; it's right enough. The old lady liked it; I kept it, in a way, for her sake—that was all."

I looked up suddenly, almost apologetically. Dynevor was looking straight at her, and looking as a man looks only under certain circumstances. I had never looked at Mrs Wynnington in that way myself, although I flatter myself that I have as keen an eye for a woman as any man in England. She was a large, luxurious, sleepy thing, almost Oriental in her reposefulness. Masses of coal black hair, dense and fine, with a natural ripple in it, framed her pale face; her eyes were black and languorous, her nose indefinite, her mouth just a trifle full. She had two rows of pearls within it, perfect in shape and colour. Her figure—well, her figure was not her strong point; I wouldn't pretend for a moment that it was; it was the figure of a woman who loved luxury and beautiful things, a woman to whom rich furs, fine laces, clinging silks and sheeny pearls were, if not a necessity, at least a natural adornment. She was still quite young, although she had been married some eight years. She scarcely ever spoke of her husband, who was always out in Assam, grilling on a tea plantation. She was frequently at home, and had a tiny flat of her own in London. I had heard her say that the climate of Assam was impossible for a woman.

"I don't like Assam," I heard her say once, "and Assam doesn't like me. I don't like the climate,

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and the climate doesn't like me. I don't like the people, and the people don't like me. I can't take any pleasure in driving thirty miles over bad roads, with worse carts, to dance with a lot of men who haven't got one idea among them. Am I fond of my husband? But certainly. I shouldn't have married him else. But I think for white people to live in India is a mistake; certainly, for husbands and wives who live as we have to do, parted half the time, is the greatest mistake of all. If I had my time to go over again, I shouldn't marry as I did. No, I don't feel that I am the least disloyal in saying it. George can't help it; it's his misfortune and mine; but it is a misfortune, nevertheless."

"There's something," said the lady to whom she had spoken, a few minutes afterward to me, "very uncanny about Mrs Wynnington, isn't there?"

"I don't know. Is there?"

"Oh, very uncanny. Horrible thing for a woman to say that she wouldn't marry the same man if she had the time to go over again. And yet she pretends to like him. It's preposterous!"

I didn't think it was so preposterous and I pitied Mrs Wynnington from the bottom of my heart, pitied her more and more when I realised that people out there thought she had a touch of native blood in her, and that she was more or less tabooed on that account. Well, if Wynnington didn't mind her having a little *pied-à-terre* in London, and coming back now and again to the surface of civilisation, like a whale coming to the surface of the water to breathe, I didn't see that it was any business of mine.

In truth, I never thought any more about Mrs Wynnington until the day that she and Dynevor,

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with one or two other people, happened to meet at a little tea-party I was giving in my chambers, and fell in love, the pair of them, with the old blue-and-white dish of which I thought so little. I really don't know whether they had met before or not, but the bond of the taste in common was very strong upon them, and they fell to making a little tour of my rooms. Presently, they were the only two of my guests who were left.

"Are you driving, Mrs Wynnnington?" I asked, when she prepared to take her leave of me.

"Yes, I'm driving," she replied.

"Well, then, take that dish with you. You'll value it much more than I shall. Take it."

"What do you mean?—that you are going to give it to me? I couldn't let you."

"Why not? I set no value on it, I assure you. It's very much of a Yorkshire gift."

"Oh, Mr Winter! but it has belonged to your family!"

"I don't know. It belonged to my aunt. Goodness only knows where she got it from. I'm sure she would rather somebody had it who valued it than that it should stay here under the tender mercies of my laundress. Take it, Mrs Wynnnington; take it without any compunction. You can send me your photograph as a little return."

She flushed scarlet, and immediately after became as pale as she usually was.

"Indeed," she said, "I will take every care of it. Your old aunt, if she knows that I have it, will know how I value and care for it. It's really too good of you to give it to me. I feel quite distressed. And yet—you don't seem to care for it. Oh, Mr

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Winter, how can you part with it?" she burst out.

"Take it away, my dear lady, take it away," I replied. "Here, let me wrap it up in this paper, and I'll carry it down to the carriage for you."

I followed her down to the carriage, followed with an intense sense of amusement at the idea of my aunt—who, by-the-bye, had been my great-aunt—troubling herself amid the glories of heaven, in which she fervently believed, about the fate of a blue-and-white dish which she had left behind her on earth. I think I had never realised the intensity of the china mania before that afternoon.

Mrs Wynnington got into the carriage and settled herself down among her furs. "Put it on the seat beside me," she said, "so that I can hold it. It might get damaged if you put it into the hood."

So I put the old dish down on the seat of the victoria, and she placed her left hand protectingly on it while she held out her right one to me.

"Good-bye, Mr Winter," she said. "I shall never forget your kindness to-day. I believe that Mr Dynevor is fit to eat me."

"Oh, Mr Dynevor is a good chap," I replied.

"Oh, yes, yes; I don't mean that—but didn't you see how he hankered after the dish?"

"I'm afraid I haven't got another for him, Mrs Wynnington," I said, in much amusement.

She smiled back at me as she drove away, and I stood on the edge of the curb, looking after her and thinking what a pity it was that things had not gone altogether well with her. True, she had her little *piéd-à-terre* in town; she had her victoria, beautiful clothes and a pleasant circle of friends. What

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wonder that she reconciled it to her conscience that her husband should be all the time in Assam?

II

IT seemed to me that from this time I was always running across John Dynevor and Mrs Wynnington together. It was about this time that I met and fell in love with the lady who afterwards became my wife. With us, furnishing was a serious matter, for we were neither of us over-blessed with this world's goods, and, as my *fiancée* had a great taste for what I call elegant old furniture, I spent a good deal of time in foraging about among the antiquity shops.

It happened one day that I was quite at the other end of the world, in Notting Hill High Street. I had got scent of a Sheraton sideboard which was going dirt cheap, so I walked into the shop, and told the young man who came forward what I wanted—not that I wanted a Sheraton sideboard by no means. I told him that I required a sideboard, and that I should like something old. Had he anything of the kind to show me? He told me they had three or four very nice sideboards, and asked me to come into the “room through” as he put it.

While I was waiting for him to draw one or two pieces of furniture away from the sideboard, which was at the back, I heard Mrs Wynnington's voice in some upper region.

“And that is positively the lowest you will take for it?” she said.

“I really couldn't take a lower price than that, madam,” was the reply.

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"It's too much," said Mrs Wynnnington, decidedly. The voice was coming nearer ; evidently she was on her way downstairs.

"No, madam, it's not too much. It's well worth the price to any buyer. Your lady," he added, apparently speaking to a third person, "does love a bargain."

I heard a man laugh, but he did not speak, and I awaited the descent of the trio with some interest, because I felt that at last I was about to see Mrs Wynnnington's husband, and she had not told me that there was any prospect of his coming home.

The next moment Mrs Wynnnington, beautifully dressed as usual, but in a simple morning frock, reached the level of the shop ; and immediately following her was, if you please, John Dynevor !

"Now, my dear Mr Winter," she cried, as she caught sight of me, "is that you ? Mr Dynevor and I met here in the most curious way, didn't we, Mr Dynevor ?"

"We did," said Mr Dynevor, unhesitatingly.

Unfortunately, I happened to be looking full at the face of the third person, and it was such a complete give away to their accidental meeting that I felt I had unwittingly put my foot into other people's business.

"And what are you after this morning ?" I said, addressing her.

"Well, I came in after a little cabinet that Mr Lazarus possesses. He's very hard to move from his price."

"I never 'bate my price," said Lazarus ; "it's bad business. Put a fair price on it at the beginning—that is, put on a moderate profit to the price you

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gave for the article—and stick to it. That's my motto, and I've found it pays me very well. Asking three times as much as you intend to take is a waste of time, and it's a degradation to the intellect. I never do it."

I burst out laughing. I had known old Lazarus for some years, as I generally went to him when I wanted to give a wedding present, and although I had never heard him express his sentiments before, for I had never tried to cheapen his goods, I felt that what he said was absolutely true.

"What Mr Dynevor came for—" Mrs Wynnington began.

"Pewter," said Dynevor.

"Ah, yes, pewter. Make your harvest while the sun shines, Mr Dynevor; you'll not have the chance of it long. One of these fine days there'll be a rush after pewter, and then you'll have to pay—oh, won't you have to pay for every little bit you buy!"

"No, I sha'n't," said he, "for by that time I shall have got as much as I want, and I shall have gone on to fresh fields and pastures new. I expect I shall be collecting oxidized copper, or something equally silly."

The tone of both was admirably careless, but it did not take me in, not for one single moment. That is one of the advantages of being a poor scribbler who writes love stories. Such a one gets into the habit of noting little things which would pass the observation even of the keenest brain. I admit that it was admirably done that morning, but it did not for a moment deceive me.

After that, it seemed to me that I met them continually.

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"Dynevov is a great pal of yours?" I said to her one day, when I chanced to meet her in a Bond Street tea-room.

She looked a little startled. "Ye-s," she said, almost hesitatingly. "I don't know that I should call him exactly a pal, Mr Winter."

"No? What name would you call it by?"

She reddened a little, and, mind you, it was a very wonderful thing to see Mrs Wynnington redden, because she was so pale, her complexion was so pure, and her manner was so quiet, not to say lethargic, that it seemed almost preposterous to think that it was possible for her to blush.

"You see," she said, almost deprecatingly, "we have a taste in common."

"H'm, yes; I suppose you have. What is the latest development of it? Is it still pewter?"

"Well, it's rather taken the form of old books—rare editions," said she.

"I see. What are you going to do with them when you go back to India?"

"Oh, I'm not collecting old books. As for my flat, I leave it exactly where it is; it's quite simple."

"Oh, I see," I replied.

Well, after that I got married, and therefore did not want to trouble myself any more about the doings of either Mrs Wynnington or Dynevov. But, about two months after Nell and I had settled down in our modest quarters, I ran across the pair of them again. I thought myself fairly sharp, but Nell was sharper than I.

"I say, Jack," said she to me, "that Mrs Wynnington—is she all right?"

"Oh, yes!"

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"Oh, she is. I shouldn't have thought it. Where's the husband?"

"He's in India, I suppose."

"You suppose? How funny!"

"The climate, you know," I remarked. "Very difficult thing for a woman to live in those wild parts where he is."

"He lives there," said Nell, drily. "If you should get to be appointed as consul to Timbuctoo, would you expect me to go with you?"

"I shouldn't expect you to remain with me if it was proved that your health couldn't stand the climate," I said, almost austere.

"Oh, you wouldn't? Well, we'll remember that, if you please."

"Yes, certainly we'll remember it. But, all the same, I'm not likely to be appointed consul to Timbuctoo, or anywhere else. As for Mrs Wynnigton, I'm sorry for her. She married a fellow she liked very much, and she doesn't get on in Assam."

"Doesn't get on with him?" said Nell.

"Yes, I think so. I think he's very fond of her—I think in her way she's very fond of him—but, still, the climate doesn't suit her. He's a tea planter with a big property. It means everything that makes life worth living for both of them that he should stop there and look after his own interests; but the climate doesn't suit her, the people don't like her—they think she's got a touch of the tar-brush about her."

"She might have," said Nell, judicially, "she might; but it's a long way back if she has. She's a beautiful creature."

"Would you call her beautiful?"

"No, I shouldn't; but, still, she's a beautiful creature,

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soft and sleek, and full of ideas; not much energy, not much go, soft, kind, gentle, womanly and yearning for love."

"She's all right, Nell; don't worry about her. Dynevor's safe enough."

"Can't bear Mr Dynevor," said Nell.

"Why not?"

"Oh, he's slinky," cried my downright spouse. "I hate slinky men—lantern-jawed, ascetic, artistic without doing anything. He always has cold hands, and he doesn't give you the idea of having a warm heart. I suppose she's the type of woman that would chum up with a Dynevor."

"Well, she has done so anyway, and it's no mortal business of ours. She didn't meet him through either of us; she's not a very intimate friend of either of us; she's not a child, she's a married woman who has seen a great deal of the world. She must row her own boat, and keep it upright. We can't pretend to steer it for her. Besides, she might very much resent our even trying."

"I wasn't thinking of attempting such a task," said Nell; "I only asked. I don't know all your friends yet. I asked it from the idlest motives, I assure you."

A few days after this we gave a little tea-party, a very modest affair, of course, for our means were modest, and our friends were not too expectant of us. I was rather surprised to see Dynevor and Mrs Wynnington come in together.

"I didn't know you had asked them," I said to Nell, as I passed her by.

"Well, I didn't ask them—at least, I mean I asked them only yesterday. I forgot to tell you," she said,

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quite penitently. "The truth was, Jack, she looked so-yearning, and so down on her luck generally, that I asked her to come. I thought it would cheer the poor thing up a little. And then she hinted that she supposed *he* was asked, and I didn't like to say no, and I let her think it was a mere scratch thing. It was very weak of me," she said penitently; "it was more than weak, but—I did it."

I laughed, and just touched her hand as we parted. So my Nell's soft heart had gone out in a sort of gush to the poor, graceful, misunderstood widow. Poor Nell! I couldn't stop to think it over then, however, and I made my way to where Mrs Wynnington was standing, admiring an old plate which was the very joy of my wife's soul.

"You like that plate?" I asked.

"It's exquisite," she replied, "exquisite."

"Picked anything up lately?" I inquired.

"Well, we had a find this morning. I think it will turn out to be a fairly big one."

"Oh, you and—er—?" I jerked my head in the direction of Dynevor, and Mrs Wynnington went guiltily red. "I understand."

"Yes. We have such a taste in common!" she declared.

"Yes, you have—yes, I know it. It's a fine thing to have a taste in common with anyone, isn't it? It helps things along so! What did you get, Mrs Wynnington?"

"A whole set of *bisque* Sèvres medallions," she replied; "filthy, dirty—black as soot, with all their lovely eyes and noses obliterated."

"What did you give for them?"

"You'll laugh when I tell you. *Sixpence each!*

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Six poor pennies each! And there are eleven of them."

"That was good business. Did you get them, or Dynevor?"

"Well, I've put two or three big finds in Mr Dynevor's way lately—I don't collect books, ~~you~~ know—and he found these out, and bought them for me. I'm going to have them mounted on blue glass—lovely sapphire-blue glass."

"On glass?"

"Yes, it shows them up so. And for the frames, gold, or black-and-gold—it's immaterial. They are quite beautiful."

"I'm sure they must be. You'll have a whole circle, or star, or something, made of them?"

"Something of that kind."

"You're a great pal of Dynevor's, aren't you?" I asked.

Again she looked at me in a startled kind of way. "Ye-s," she said, "I suppose we are pals, as you call it. Mr Winter, I'm so sorry for him, somehow."

"Sorry?" I said. "For Dynevor! Are you? And why?"

"He is an unhappy man."

"Oh, is he? I didn't know."

"But you have known him quite a long time. He tells me you were almost boys together."

"Yes, we were—yes. That doesn't mean that one knows a man later on."

"But don't you?"

"I hardly think so. I have enjoyed his acquaintance for a great number of years. That is not quite the same as knowing a man."

"No."

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"And Dynevor isn't easy to know."

She looked at me with a world of eloquence in her velvet-brown eyes.

"You don't agree with me?" I said. "I didn't think you would. Now, tell me—of course, I'm always curious to know these things—why are you so sorry for Dynevor?"

"He's so unhappy!"

"Is he? What is he unhappy about?"

"He's not—his wife isn't—oh, you know. He's miserably unhappy. They don't hit it off. She's an impossible person."

"Who is?"

"Mrs Dynevor."

"Impossible? I see nothing impossible about her."

"But you couldn't know her?"

"Couldn't know Mrs Dynevor! Oh, that's news. Why couldn't you know Mrs Dynevor?"

"I don't know why. He told me that it was impossible—that she was the kind of person he couldn't introduce anybody to."

"Dynevor told you that?"

"He did."

"My dear girl," I said gravely, "you may take my word for it that Dynevor's wife is one of the best-known women in London. *She's* the important one of the two, not Dynevor."

"Why isn't she here?"

"To-day? She may be. She may come at any moment. She was here one day last week. She's a journalist of great reputation, although her name doesn't come very much to the front. Dynevor has money and brains; if Dynevor had had brains with-

A Taste in Common

out money, he might have made some use of them ; as it is, he has practically spent his life in dreaming."

"Poor fellow!" She barely breathed the two words, and presently she took her leave of us.

Dynevor went down to the carriage with her, and came up again with his wife, whom he had met on the door-step.

"So glad to see that you make Johnnie useful, Mrs Winter," was her greeting to my spouse. "I never can get him to go to the door with ladies when they come to see me."

"Ah, he behaves better here," said Nell, who had the charity not to give the show away.

"Dynevor," I said presently to him, "that was a little inopportune, wasn't it?"

"What?"

"Your wife coming to-day?"

"Oh, I don't know."

"I hope, my dear fellow," I said, "that you haven't been giving your friend, Mrs Wynnington, to understand that my wife's house isn't everything that it should be?"

"I don't understand you," he said shortly.

"Don't you? I shall explain. Mrs Wynnington is an old friend of mine. She spoke this afternoon with regret of your cruel luck in not having a happier domestic life, in being tied up to a woman who wasn't all right, whom you couldn't introduce to her, who, practically, was not received in Society. She meets that lady in my wife's house, and I require an explanation."

"I have none to give you. I'll take your hint, Winter. I'll not intrude upon you again."

"Very well. And you will be sure to make it right

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with Mrs Wynnington, so that no shadow of doubt can rest in her mind about my wife."

"Oh, certainly, certainly. She has misunderstood me, that's all. Of course, the idea that Mrs Winter's house could not be all right is preposterous."

"No more, so than the idea that your wife isn't all right. There's *one* of you who is not all right, Dynevor," I said, taking his arm in a grip of iron, "but it isn't your wife."

"I don't understand you," he said shortly.

"Don't you? It's like the old story of the little girl sitting by the fireside with her grandmother and the cat. The grandmother had vexed the little girl, and she said to the cat: 'Pussy, dear, I wish one of us three was dead. I don't mean you, Pussy, and I don't mean me, Pussy, but I do wish one of us three was dead.'"

He gave a sort of angry laugh, and, turning on his heel, walked straight across the room to his wife. What he said to her I do not know, but she looked up, poor woman, with a sort of yearning in her eyes and said, "Won't you wait for me, Johnnie?"

"I'm awfully sorry I can't," he replied. "I shall be in to dinner, but I've got an appointment I must keep in ten minutes from now."

As he swung out of the door, I went across and asked her to come into the next room and have some tea. I could swear that there was a suspicious brightness about her eyes, but I was not supposed to see anything, and so I looked discreetly the other way.

A few days later I received a note by hand from Mrs Wynnington:—

A Taste in Common

"I should have come to say good-bye to you, dear Mr Winter, and to your charming wife, but I have been so rushed! I am off to Assam, intending to catch the boat at Brindisi. You will understand, I had to go. I intend to stay out quite a long time. If I want change, I shall go up to Simla. Keep a little corner in your hearts for me, you and that charming wife of yours. Think of me sometimes; pity me, if you can, out in the country that I hate, although I shall be with the husband I love. Oh, if only he had money enough to live in London, where surely we should find a taste in common!—Yours always,

MYRA WYNNINGTON."

A CORONATION IDYLL

CHAPTER I

"It is out of the question," said a girl's voice; "it is impossible."

"But why? I don't understand." The speaker was a ~~man~~, a young man. "I think it is quite possible—I think it is more than possible."

"No, it is out of the question. We're going away to-morrow, mother and I, and very likely we shall never come back to Germany any more. And you're going away too?"

"Yes, I am going away too."

"And very likely you will never come back to Germany either."

"Well, if you are not to be here, I don't care if I never do. That's no reason why we shouldn't meet somewhere else."

"It won't do. My people—my mother—"

"Well?"

"Well, she has a prejudice. She warned me solemnly before I came away this time that I was to get to know no foreign young men."

"We're both foreigners here," said the young man, in rather a piqued tone.

"Oh, yes; but you know how insular and how prejudiced English people are."

A Coronation Idyll

"*Some* English people," he corrected.

She cast a glance at him from under her dark lashes, then in a twinkling the brim of her hat went down and shut out the whole radiant vision of her face, excepting the edge of her peach-bloom cheek.

"I wish you would look at me again," said the young man.

"Why?"

"Because you're very delightful to look at."

"I? I'm surprised you think so. I'm so English."

"Yes, you're very English."

"No girl of your country," Violet Travers went on, "would be allowed, or would dream of going off on a country jaunt like this, alone, with nothing but her bicycle to keep her company—and—and—"

"Yes, I should like to know what it is that the girls of my country wouldn't do."

"Well, I don't suppose they'd do this; and," dropping her voice a little lower, "there would be an awful row if anybody knew I was doing it at this minute."

"Why? There's no harm. You've taken a long ride on your bicycle because you wanted to see what was on the other side of the blue hills; you have ridden at least ten miles; it's a natural thing that you should get off at this little inn and ask for a cup of coffee."

"Yes, that's so," she admitted.

"It's an equally natural thing that I, who am staying in the same hotel as yourself, should—er—should happen to feel a little curiosity about the other side of the blue hills as well as yourself."

"We didn't plan it out," she said.

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"No, we didn't—at least, you planned it out, and I fell in with it."

"I never told you a word," she flashed out.

"You didn't. You were most reticent. But I saw you start, you see, and somehow I rode at a quicker pace than you did, and here we are. Well, I'm having a cup of coffee too; I've ridden ten miles. I'd like to go and feed the carp presently, over there in the pond. And wouldn't you?"

"I shouldn't mind," said Violet.

"Well, what's the harm?"

"I don't know that there's any harm," she said, reddening, "only mother warned me—"

"We were quite formally introduced to each other, don't forget that," interrupted the young man.

"Yes, we were; but, all the same, I don't know what your name is—not properly."

"My name?" He laughed a little, showing very white teeth and a very gay, debonnair look gleamed in his eyes. "My name? Well now, look here, Miss Travers, we'll not mince matters as to my name. I'll write it out for you—eh?"

"Why?"

"And then when you have made quite sure that you can't possibly pronounce it—and no English person could pronounce my name under at least a week of hard work—then you shall call me Mr—Smith."

"But is your name Smith? It didn't sound like it when Sir Charles introduced you."

"Ah, I daresay not. You see, Sir Charles hasn't spent a week of hard work over my name. Now look here, is that a letter I see sticking out of your

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pocket? Well, let me write it on the back of that envelope."

He took a pencil from his watch-chain and wrote in capital letters—ZOBOWERWEITCHZ.

"There! That's my name," he said. "It's fairly well known in my own country, but for convenience I always tell English people to call me Smith."

"But what is your country, Mr—Smith?" asked Violet.

"I am a Magyar," he replied.

"I see. That isn't quite German, is it?"

"Well, it isn't exactly—no, it isn't. It's Magyar. Do you see? And so you really are going away to-morrow?"

"Yes, we're going away to-morrow."

"Home?"

"Oh, no; we're going on to the Engadine, and then we're going to stop at Ostend on our way back."

"My fate will not take me to the Engadine this year, nor yet to Ostend. You'll let me call on you when I come to London?"

"I don't see how I could account for you to my mother."

"Oh, nonsense! I'll account for myself. Surely Sir Charles's introduction is good enough? And you'll be glad to see me if I come?"

"I suppose so." She was drawing quaint little patterns in the dust of the inn-yard with the toe of her little brown shoe. "Oh, yes. But the question is whether—whether—my mother would be so pleased to see you. I think I shall make a clean breast of it when I go home."

"What! Tell her? And tell her everything?"

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Tell her that for the last fortnight we've explored the neighbourhood thoroughly?"

"We haven't!" she flashed out.

"Well, you have. And I fell in with your plans."

"I never made any plans."

"No, no; but you have gaily biked about the neighbourhood, and I happened to choose the same route. There's nothing to confess, there's nothing to make a clean breast of. You haven't even let me pay for your coffee; you haven't even let me spend a few pence in flowers. But, Miss Violet, we've got to the end of our pleasant little comradeship now; we sha'n't see each other again for quite a long time. I'm not free; I have to go where I'm sent; otherwise you would see me in the Engadine, and you would probably see me at Ostend. But you haven't answered my question properly."

"What was that?"

"Well, when we meet again you will be glad to see me?"

Violet Travers's eyes dropped. "Oh, yes," she said, with a fine air of indifference. "I'm always glad to see my friends again."

"I didn't ask you for a general answer; I asked you for a straight one."

Again she looked up at him under the brim of her hat. "I might be glad to see you," she said demurely.

"Ah, it's ten chances to one that I shall go to London next year, because I might be sent there any time; but I shouldn't be surprised if I get there about the time of the Coronation."

"Mr Smith," said Violet, "are you really a Magyar?"

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"I really am."

"You speak such wonderful English," she said.

"Ah, that's because our language is a difficult one."

"You have been in England a great deal?"

"No, not very much; not as much as I should like. But I had an English nurse. My mother was very fond of English servants. You see, my mother was not a Magyar born."

A question rose to the girl's lips asking his mother's nationality, but ere it could be uttered there was a cloud of dust, the quick, regular beat of horses' feet, and a carriage drew up with a great clatter and noise at the entrance to the garden. There must have been another carriage in the rear, for a moment later two ladies and several gentlemen passed under the lime trees into the garden. The hotelkeeper came flying to meet them, followed by an excited waiter; and as the group passed the table at which the young people were sitting, the Magyar with the unpronounceable name started to his feet and stood, six-foot-three of splendid manhood, in an attitude of salute.

"It's the King," whispered Violet in a vexed tone.

"He hates to be noticed."

CHAPTER II

NEARLY a year had gone by. A cold, dreary, and exceptionally disagreeable winter, troubled with sickening rumours of small-pox, and scourged by a new form of influenza, had come and gone. The great heart of the world had put aside its troubles,

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and was preparing to make merry over the great function the like of which had not been seen during ~~three~~ generations.

But everybody in London was not happy, and in a certain little house in St James's Street, a house which was, to be exact, what is called an "upper part," and which was over the shop of a fashionable breeches maker, in this house the bright spring skies were looking exceedingly gloomy. The time was about ten o'clock in the morning; the scene was the little dining-room in which Mrs Travers and Violet were sitting at breakfast.

"I consider," said Mrs Travers, vexedly, her eyes fixed angrily upon a letter which she had in her hand, "I consider that your Aunt Margaret is, without any exception, the most unthinking and the most selfish woman I ever came across in my life."

"Oh, come, come!" cried Violet.

"It's all very well to say 'Come, come!' That was what your father always said. The one chance I've got of making a little out of this house she takes away from me just at the moment when it was within my grasp. Think of netting a hundred pounds by letting the house for a fortnight; with the offer of fifty pounds more if I let it for the two weeks following; and your Aunt Margaret to choose that very moment to come and foist herself upon us."

"Not exactly that, mother, dear."

"Yes, it is exactly that."

"Oh, mother! Why, she pays half the rent."

"For her own convenience," exclaimed Mrs Travers, in disgusted accents. "How many times, I ask you, during the five years that we have been in this house, has your Aunt Margaret dreamed of

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coming here in June? The whole of May, and then to stay three or four days on her way to Homburg—that in the third week in July. Never has she set foot in this house in June since we've had it."

"No; but there was no bargain that she shouldn't. And she's very anxious to see the Coronation."

"The Coronation! An old woman like your Aunt Margaret! Ridiculous! I don't want to see the Coronation," Mrs Travers cried. "I'm young enough to be your Aunt Margaret's daughter, and you're young enough to be her granddaughter. You don't want to see the Coronation."

"Oh, I don't say that," cried Violet. "We may as well see it while we have the chance. Of course, dear mother, when you put a solid lump of money like a hundred pounds against the Coronation, well, naturally, the Coronation goes to the wall. But I should love to see it all the same."

"Oh, I haven't patience with you!"

"No, darling, you haven't," cried Violet, with a comical look. "Anyway, I don't see what you can do. Aunt Margaret pays half the rent on condition that her bedroom is available whenever she chooses to have it, and as she chooses to come to the Coronation, why, your nice solid hundred pounds will have to go to the wall instead of Aunt Margaret."

"I suppose it would be no use laying it before her," said Mrs Travers, doubtfully.

"Oh, no, no—no! That would never do. She might cut us out of her will altogether. Oh, I wouldn't risk that," said Violet, laughing outright. "I should just make a virtue of necessity, mother, and I should give a lovely lunch for the Coronation,

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and ask all the friends that you owe most to in the way of dinners and things."

"Yes, I suppose I must. But still, when I think of the good time that we might have had away on the hundred and fifty pounds, it's heart-breaking."

So it happened that the little "upper part" in St James's Street was not in the market for the great function of 1902.

If the truth be told, and it's no use telling a story unless one does tell the truth, Violet herself was ~~secretly~~ delighted at the turn which affairs had taken. She had never forgotten the fascinating young man—six-foot-three of him—with the unpronounceable name who had told her to call him "Smith," and whom she had met at Homburg. He had told her distinctly that it was not impossible that he might be in London about the time of the Coronation, and if she were out of London of course his coming would be useless.

The mother and daughter were socially very well placed, and they went out duly and truly during the whole of that brilliant season, but never a sign did Violet see of the splendid young man with the name of fifteen letters who called himself "Smith."

She was very pretty, this girl, with a wild-rose complexion, silky brown hair, that grew beautifully about her oval face, with adorable grey eyes, and a charming smile. Admirers she had galore, and, very much to Mrs Travers's disgust, several excellent offers during the early part of the year, which she refused. Violet herself would have been hard set to tell why she refused them.

"Yes, Colonel Chalmers did ask me to take Chalmers's Rest and him into the bargain," she

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admitted to her mother one morning. "No, I didn't care about him. He's very fine and large, darling mother, but not for me. Too pompous, too—er—"

"Not old, Violet?"

"No, mother, dear, not old. A little set on."

"But, dear, none of the young men have any money."

"Need I marry money?"

"No, not for money's sake. But remember, Violet you have been brought up comfortably, and a thousand a year of my income dies with me. It's that that makes me a little anxious. Fifteen hundred a year is a good income for two women who have no particular position to keep up. They can live well, comfortably, almost luxuriously, on it. But think if you were left with only five hundred a year, and then you married some young man who had another five hundred."

"It would be a pinch," said Violet.

"Yes, it would be a pinch, provided there were no more; but if you added to your numbers it would be something worse than a pinch. God knows, child, I don't want you to marry for money—I loathe the idea, it's horrible to me—but I do want you to marry with something of an eye to the future."

"Not Colonel Chalmers, darling. I really couldn't."

"Well, well, that's enough."

The other offers that came in Violet's way she discreetly kept to herself. It would be hard to say why; perhaps because each of them was a little more advantageous than the offer of Colonel Chalmers had been.

And so the season passed on until the long-looked-for month of Coronation came in. As old Lady

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Dorringham, Violet's aunt, or rather great-aunt, had duly arrived at the little house in St James's Street, Mrs Travers had taken advantage of her daughter's suggestion that she should pay off as much as possible of her social liabilities by a lunch to view the great procession. She had many liabilities, and she had six front windows, two immediately above the breeches makers' shop, with quite a respectable, even commodious, balcony. By these means Violet was relegated to the topmost window, at which she and two young men, both of them extremely eligible, sat to see all that could be seen. One of these happened to be the Sir Charles Pallenge who had brought about the acquaintance between Violet and the young man who spelt the name of Smith with fifteen letters.

At last the auspicious moment arrived, and the great procession began to file by. What a time it was! The people in the windows had only one feeling among them, which was that nature had dealt hardly with them in giving them but one pair of eyes, and that a pair which would only allow themselves to be used in the same direction.

"Oh, I can't see everybody," cried Violet, leaning yet further out of the window.

"Well, you get as good a view here as you would anywhere in London," said Sir Charles.

"Much better than in most places," put in the other man. "I hate those hoardings they stick up, where you get three matinee hats between you and a sight of anything."

"Oh!—oh!" cried Violet.

"What's the matter? Who is it?" asked Sir Charles.

"Where? Which?" cried the other man.

A Coronation Idyll

"Oh, do look! Just behind that man in the blue and gold uniform. Do you see?—Do you see?"

"Why, it's Smith," said Sir Charles. "You knew he was coming to the Coronation, didn't you?"

"Is his name Smith?" asked Violet, not answering the question.

"Oh, dear, no! It's Jobbywhiskey, or something like that. I spent a whole hour trying to get it, but two groans and a sneeze was the nearest I could manage, and he told me to call him 'Smith.' He said it was easier. * And there he is looking up at us. Do you see him, Miss Travers?"

Did she see him! Why, he was looking right up at the window, and bowing with his hand on his heart and such a look in his eyes that a flush of shame came over Violet Travers's wild-rose face as she remembered the one or two natural, but, as it seemed then, extremely unworthy conjectures which had flitted across her mind concerning his social status; and here he was part of the most brilliant procession that had ever passed up even that historic street, a somebody with a place of his own, while she was a mere nobody looking on, part of the gaping crowd.

A few hours had gone by. The street was quiet, save for those who were already afoot that they might miss nothing of the splendid decorations and illuminations for the crowning of the great King.

There was soft and subdued lights in Mrs Travers's little drawing-room, and there was the sound of several voices in animated converse; but on the old-fashioned balcony, as yet unlighted for the show of the evening, there were only two persons, who were

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making no noise at all. One wore a splendid Hungarian uniform, the other a simple white frock.

"And you went away," said he, "without ever giving me your London address."

"I didn't think, Prince—" she began.

"You didn't think what? That I should want it? Oh, didn't you know when you went away from Homburg that you carried my heart with you? You did, dearest, you did; and so I have come to beg yours in exchange."

DOLLY BROWNE'S INSTINCT

CHAPTER I

MRS CONINGSBY-BROWNE'S belief was not exactly a matter of religion, though in importance it fell but little short of that. Mrs Coningsby-Browne's belief was in herself, and never in all my experience did I come across a woman who was so thoroughly imbued in the sacred preciousness of her own personality as she was.

A handsome woman of commanding presence, it was not surprising that she believed in herself from a physical standpoint. But Mrs Coningsby-Browne's belief did not stop at a genuine admiration of her personal attractions. No, for she really and truly believed in herself, mentally, socially, and in every other way.

As I said, she was a handsome woman. Not a great beauty or ever had been, but a large up-standing figure inclining to fat, with a rather juvenile head, on which she generally wore somewhat flaring hats very much turned up on one side, three-cornered or anything rather than approaching to the modest bonnet which custom used to insist was demanded by her age and size. Mind you, she dressed well.

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I am not a married man, but I know when a woman is properly turned out quite as well as ever I used in the old days to know when my men were all right when I went down to the ranks on the parade ground. Some people think that when a woman gets past the meridian of life, she ought not to know or care what is the fashion, or wear anything but the most dowdy and unbecoming garments. I cannot see the force of such a belief, and for my own part, if I should happen to live to be a hundred and ninety, I shall just take as much care to have my coat cut as I do now. In fact, I don't know whether I shall not be very much more particular, for I shall either have got very fat or else very thin and, in either case, shall be a more difficult figure to make for than I am at present. Mrs Coningsby-Browne went to a good tailor and to a good dressmaker, when she was not taken with a fit of economy and wore things which were what she called "run up by my maid." Those things were a source of unfailing derision to her daughter Dolly, "Dolly Browne" as everybody called her, without that terrible prefix which seemed so dear to her mother's soul. "Really, mammy, dear," she said one day when I was having a cup of tea with them, "you ought to get Colonel Jervis to execute Parker for you. That woman does treat you abominably."

"Parker!" echoed Mrs Coningsby-Browne, blankly. "Why, I should never find such a treasure again, Dolly, never! I assure you, Colonel, that my maid Parker is the most invaluable creature in all the world. Never happy unless she is at work, always busy and occupied, and saves me pounds and pounds in the course of the year."

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"I'd kill her if she was mine," put in Dolly vindictively.

"You're quite bloodthirsty, Miss Dolly," I remarked, with a laugh.

"I am where the excellent Parker is concerned," returned Miss Dolly, promptly. "And how my mother can allow any creature to make such a guy of her as she is in that horrible garment she is wearing now, I cannot conceive. Parker calls it a tea-gown . . . I call it a patent hideousifyer."

"A what?" Mrs Coningsby-Browne exclaimed.

"A patent hideousifyer," repeated Miss Dolly, sturdily. "And, mammy, dear, believe me, there is no money in it. Not a woman in all the wide world *wants* to be made hideous, and the prisons are all quite well satisfied with their own patent in that line and wouldn't buy Parker's."

"What a child it is," said Mrs Coningsby-Browne in a playful aside to me.

Miss Dolly laughed. "All the same," she remarked, "it is a very serious matter for me. Here I am on my promotion, expected to get married and not to throw myself away. You're a sworn old bachelor, Colonel Jervis, so I can say what I like to you. And what man, I ask you, is going to marry a girl whose mother wears such a thing as *that*, and is ruled with a rod of iron by her maid—a maid who can't turn out a better specimen of taste than that?"

"Hush, my dear! Poor Parker would be cruelly hurt if she heard you."

"I don't mind," said Miss Dolly. "Better that Parker's *amour propre* should suffer, than that your only child's prospects should be blighted for ever."

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Mrs Coningsby-Browne laughed. "Well, I fancy my new tea-gown myself. You don't; but you know, dear Dolly, you are not conspicuous for your taste, and you certainly are for the violence of your views. I am not an obstinate woman, so I will ask Colonel Jervis's opinion. Now, Colonel, look at me well and tell me what you think of my tea-gown."

She got up from her chair and paraded up and down in front of me, turning herself this way and that, and revolving slowly round and round. I steadfastly regarded the garment from head to foot, and I must admit that—looked at from such a point of view—it was frightful. It was of dark green silk, was very voluminous and frilly, with huge sleeves that stuck out stiffly like small balloons, while the back was very tight and wrinkly. Seen as its wearer sat in a high-backed chair covered in rich yellow silk, with its high collar—(I suppose it is a storm collar when it sets well up above the ears, at least that is what I have seen them called in ladies' advertisements, or, I should say, in advertisements of ladies' garments)—lined with lace, it had looked effective enough, but seen as she revolved slowly round and round it was—!

"Now, be honest," said Miss Dolly in warning accents.

"I—I—I certainly have seen you in gowns that I admired more," I admitted guardedly.

"What is wrong with it?" Mrs Coningsby-Browne demanded.

"Everything!" declared Miss Dolly, like a flash of lightning.

Dolly Browne's Instinct

"Dolly! Dolly! let the Colonel speak," cried the mother.

"Oh, I am not trying to keep him from speaking," rejoined the daughter, quickly. "I only want the poor man to speak it frankly and unreservedly."

"Where is it wrong?" Mrs Coningsby-Browne demanded again.

"I am afraid I don't quite understand the technicalities of it," I said hesitatingly. "But if it were a man's tunic, I should say that there was something wrong about the back of it."

"This part of the back?" she asked, sliding a hand with much difficulty to a point just under the shoulders.

"Ye-es."

Mrs Coningsby-Browne sat down in her chair again with an air of triumph. "That's only because you are a man and, as you say, don't understand the technicalities. This back is quite a new fashion, and only one dressmaker out of a hundred can manage it properly. You have only confirmed me in my view that Parker is a maid in a million."

"Clever Parker to persuade you that her failures are the latest fashion," put in Miss Dolly, with a laugh.

Some other visitors were shown in and the subject dropped. Mrs Coningsby-Browne's belief in the virtues of her maid remained unaltered, and she continued to wear the tea-gown which her daughter so much disliked. Miss Dolly's objection to the unfortunate Parker remained unchanged likewise.

"I do hate that woman," she said to me one after-

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noon when I had dropped in about tea-time at the dainty house in Melville Crescent.

Parker had come into the drawing-room to bring her mistress a letter, and it was as she closed the door softly behind her that Dolly Browne gave vent to this vindictive little speech.

"I should not have thought it was worth while hating her, Miss Dolly," I said soothingly.

"My dear Colonel Jervis," she said between her teeth, "Parker is not like the ordinary servant, whom one would not dream of loving or hating. She is the only person in all the world that I am afraid of. Do you know that I always lock my bedroom door at night on account of Parker? Of course, only, entirely, solely, wholly on account of Parker; I always feel that she is somehow mixed up in my fate."

"Oh, Miss Dolly!"

"I do indeed! As if she would contrive, by hook or by crook, to do me some dire injury. I never hated anybody so much in all my life. I don't believe she is what she seems. She writes a better hand than I do. She plays the piano superbly—only she does not know that I have heard her."

"You mean that she has played here?"

"Oh, no; but I was at a music shop in the town a few weeks ago, and I heard someone playing in the inner room; they keep an inner room, you know, where people can go and practise who have not pianos at home, or who don't want to upset their people or their neighbours. 'Who is that playing?' I asked. The young lady replied at once, 'Oh, it is a lady who comes here to practise

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sometimes. She does play well, doesn't she?' I crept down the shop to get a peep at her. Imagine my surprise when I found it was the immaculate Parker! Well, I suppose she is somebody who has come down in the world, and prefers to be a maid to being a governess."

"Your mother says she is such a good maid, Miss Dolly."

"A palmist once told my mother," said Miss Dolly, trenchantly, "that the most dominant note in her character was that she lived her life off her own bat, as it were; that her own opinion to her was worth more than that of all the rest of the world; and ever since then," Miss Dolly, added with a sigh, "poor darling mammy would rather die than not go by her own opinion. She is really a most dependent, clinging, and almost helpless woman, but she likes to fancy herself strong—she likes to believe, and she does believe, that her opinion once given is unalterable as the laws of the Medes and Persians; so everything falls under the domination of Parker; she will cheerfully endure anything rather than allow that Parker is not perfection. I should like to kill Parker," said Dolly Browne more vindictively than ever.

"She is not worth killing," I remarked.

"I don't know," returned the girl, shortly. "A fortune-teller once told me—not the same palmist that bamboozled my mother—that the greatest grief in my life would be brought about by a person living under the same roof with me, and that I was to be very careful not to allow any woman with bright auburn hair to get mixed up in my affairs. Parker has

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bright auburn hair ; it is real, in colour and texture and abundance it is beautiful—I think a painter would call it ‘glorious.’ I tell you I am afraid of Parker.”

Now, personally, I cannot say that I believe in palmists and such like people as live upon the credulity and weaknesses of those less strong in will power than themselves, yet it did seem strange that this girl should have had a warning of so serious a kind, coupled with so close a personal description as this.

“Tell me, Miss Dolly,” I asked, “was the estimable Parker living with you then, because, if so, it would be a very commonplace trick for a fortune-teller to warn you in such terms?”

She looked at me with a strange apprehension in her velvet-like eyes—she had lovely eyes had Dolly Browne. “No, Colonel Jervis,” she said in a tone that was nervous and scared. “It was more than two years before we had ever seen Parker. It happened up in the far north of England, and the fortune-teller was an ordinary wandering gipsy. My mother engaged Parker in London more than two years afterwards. I was abroad at the time, and when I saw the girl my heart seemed to stop still.”

“Don’t you think you may have been unduly prejudiced against what may have been a mere coincidence, a pure accident?” I suggested.

“No,” she said, “I don’t. Parker never looks you in the face ; Parker is what a man would call ‘a wrong ’un.’”

“But surely, Miss Dolly,” I said, “if you told Mrs Browne what you feel about her, she would get rid of her?”

Dolly Browne's Instinct

"Yes, possibly she would, but I don't want to tell her. I never told anybody else what I feel about her; I don't intend to do so. I don't know what made me tell you," she ended vexedly.

"But surely you know that anything you say to me is absolutely safe?"

"Yes, yes—I hope so! Forgive me, Colonel—of course I know that it is."

At that moment the parlour-maid showed in some other visitors, and velvet-eyed Dolly shook herself together again, as if she had allowed herself to be betrayed into saying too much.

"I am sure, Colonel Jervis," she said to me, "you must think me a perfect fool to have let myself say so much; perhaps I am all wrong, and Parker is the excellent, deserving creature that my mother would have everybody believe. Try to forget that I have given myself away so thoroughly as either to express any fear or any dislike of such a creature. You men are so prejudiced, you know. In spite of all these new women movements, I know perfectly well that we shall never take any different place in the world to what we have always taken. We are too full of our prejudices—too given to judging by our hearts and not by our heads. See! there is that charming Lady Jane! Come, you know her, don't you?"

"No, I have not met Lady Jane," I replied.

"Really? Then come along and I will introduce you." She led the way across the room and presented me to the lady who had come in last. "Lady Jane Trevor."

"I think," said Lady Jane, "that you used to know my husband very well."

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"Not Cosmo Trevor?" I exclaimed

"Yes, that is my husband," she said, with a swift, bright smile.

"Oh, really, I had no idea that he was married. And do you live here?"

"The greater part of the year, yes. I am not very strong. You must come and see me, Colonel Jervis. I don't know when Cosmo will be here. He goes away a good deal . . . he is so very keen on sport."

"Oh, yes, he was always so."

"I am not strong enough to gad about the world much. Do come and have tea with me to-morrow."

CHAPTER II

DAYS wore into weeks and weeks drifted presently, almost aimlessly, into months, and I somehow settled down into my place in St Mildred's society very much as if I had never in my life done anything but take care of my health, and had nothing more important to occupy me than the cut of my clothes and the quality of my dinner. In one way it was pleasant, in another sense I hated it. I felt such an old woman—it was absurd, seeing that I had not yet touched my half century. However, when a man—or, for the matter of that, a woman—develops a chest, that chest must be considered and taken care of, willy nilly. My chest was well enough at St Mildred's; it let me do everything that there was to do in the town and neighbourhood; but when I went up to London on important business just before Christmas it huzzled me down to the sun-

Dolly Browne's Instinct

shine again on the morning of the second day, and I knew then that Dr Dillory had been right when he told me that I should not venture to spend even twenty-four hours in London except during the three best months of the year.

There was a lot going on about Christmas time. The John Jermyns gave a dance; Mrs Coningsby-Browne gave another; the cavalry regiment stationed at the camp gave a big ball which was followed by a charity ball for the hospital. Then the yeomanry followed suit, and St Mildred's bloomed out into quite an epidemic of gaiety. About this time I became aware that my friend, Dolly Browne, had other fish to fry than to talk to me or to think about Parker. Indeed, from the afternoon that I had first met Lady Jane Trevor in Melville Crescent Dolly had never once mentioned her mother's maid. I met the admirable Parker once or twice, but always closely veiled, and recognisable only by the peculiar colour of her beautiful hair.

"I feel very jealous of that fellow in the Tenth, Miss Dolly," I said to her one night when she was dancing with him.

"Oh, don't say that—it is ridiculous, Colonel Jervis," she replied quickly, with a sudden deepening of the bloom upon her cheeks. "Besides, what fellow do you mean?"

"You know well enough," I said teasingly. "Miss Dolly, it is a terrible thing when a man comes to be an old fogey—and he never feels it so bitterly as when the young ladies pass him by for his juniors."

She laughed, but it was a nervous kind of laugh.

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"You never gave me an idea that you wanted me to keep all my favours for you, Colonel Jervis," she said coquettishly.

"Perhaps I did not; I was like that young lady whom Shakespeare wrote about, who 'let concealment like a worm feed on her damask cheek!'"

She laughed again. "If concealment has fed on your damask cheek, Colonel Jervis," she said gaily, "you are certainly doing your best to repair the omission."

"But am I to understand that—"

She looked so mischievous and so pretty with her blush-rose complexion, her great, deep velvety eyes, and her saucy little nose and rather wide-smiling mouth, that I felt a kind of throb stirring my tough old heart.

"My dance, I believe," said a voice at my elbow—it was that fellow in the Tenth. I gave an expressive look at Dolly Browne; she went away laughing.

That night Philip Greville proposed. I heard the news the following day from Mrs Coningsby-Browne herself when I met her taking her morning promenade along the pine walk particularly devoted to invalids.

"I have such news for you, Colonel Jervis," she said, as I approached her chair. "I am sure you will be pleased to hear it. Dolly is engaged."

"What! did it come off last night?" I exclaimed.

"Yes, it did indeed."

"I thought it was imminent. Well, I congratulate the gentleman very much."

"Oh, but you must congratulate Dolly too, for she

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is very happy in her new relation. But I am only going to tell you," she said mysteriously, "because, to tell you the truth, I have not yet had an interview with Mr Greville. He just spoke to me after I got into the carriage, and he is coming as soon as he is free of his duties, that is to say he is coming to lunch; but you are really such an old friend—although we have only known you such a short time—and you have been Dolly's friend, and I wanted to tell you."

"I shall come in to tea this afternoon and hear all about it—offer my congratulations and then retire into oblivion and total neglect, Mrs Coningsby-Browne," I said with mock tragedy.

"Well, I hope that you will not pay me such a bad compliment as that, Colonel. I hope that you will often come to see me, even after Dolly has flown the nest."

"I shall come as often as I am made welcome, Mrs Coningsby-Browne," I replied, flourishing my hat off as some other people approached the side of the Bath-chair.

Mrs Coningsby-Browne was not an invalid—far from it—but she always took exercise in a Bath-chair for an hour or so before luncheon. She liked to meet her friends without fatigue, holding a sort of informal reception, and gathering together her little concourses for later in the day.

When I was shown into the drawing-room at Melville Crescent a little after five that afternoon, I met quite a crowd of people, all full of the engagement, evidently each one having been told the news as a profound secret during the morning's airing.

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I congratulated Dolly very sincerely. She looked so happy and so winsome as she received the congratulations of one after another, that I did indeed think Philip Greville a lucky fellow to have won so charming a girl for his very own. I told him as much when he turned up about half an hour after myself. His eyes wandered over to Dolly as he listened to me.

"Yes, Colonel," he said, "I know I am a lucky chap; she is everything that a man could most wish for in his wife. You know," he went on, after a minute or so of silence, "a most curious thing happened to me the other day just before we got our route from Ireland. I had my fortune told by a gipsy woman—a queer, dishevelled, wild-eyed hag, who had never been across the Channel in her life. She told me I was going to meet my fate in my next quarters. Curious, wasn't it? Very curious."

"I believe there is something in it," I said quietly; "and yet it seems going against one's ideas of reason and right, that an old ignorant Irish woman—or gipsy woman—should be able to foretell one's destiny—and yet there is something in it; but what a charming fate, my dear Greville; you ought to find out that old gipsy woman and send her a sovereign."

"I will try when I am married," he said.

A few days after this the engagement was announced in the local papers and in all the journals of the smart world, and in less than a month invitations for the wedding were sent out, and all St Mildred's was vying with each other as to the beauty and originality of the wedding presents. The regiment came out splendidly. A special dinner was

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given for the bride-elect, followed by a small dance given only to a select few. I had never seen anything so happy as Dolly Browne. I don't know that I ever saw a girl who was so typically English as she was at that period—so fresh, so blooming, so soft and sweet and bright, without being either flippant or loud. She was so happy that she even forgave Parker for being Parker.

I ventured just three days before the wedding to mention the ruddy-haired maid to her. Dolly's mobile face softened.

"Oh, poor Parker," she said. "Do you know, Colonel Jervis, I believe I was most unjust to her—I do really—I have thought about Parker during the last few weeks, and I feel almost inclined to confess to her and apologise for having wronged her so thoroughly. She will be a great comfort to my mother when I am gone, because my mother does depend upon her so much. Poor Parker!"

"Miss Dolly," I said, "don't do anything of the kind; you have not done Parker any harm because you wished to have no dealings with Parker, and you have not talked about her to anyone else—the least said the soonest mended. Parker will be none the worse for your having been prejudiced against her for a little while."

Well, three days afterwards Dolly Browne became Mrs Philip Greville. The church was crammed, the reception at the house was a struggling, seething mass of humanity, and I for one was relieved, when I saw the bride go off to change her wedding dress, to feel that nobody had been crushed to death. That moment was the signal for the split up of the party.

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One contingent of guests went off to the railway station to see the very last of the bride and groom. Another took up their posts in the hall and about the doorsteps, and on the wide gravel drive by which the houses in Melville Crescent were approached. A few seated themselves on the balcony with supplies of rice and old slippers, and I—purely by accident—remained in the large drawing-room with Mrs Coningsby-Browne and a fair number of guests who had not thought it necessary to move.

The first of the bridal pair to join us was Philip Greville. Mrs Coningsby-Browne bore down upon him as he came in.

“Dear Philip,” she said in a tremulous voice, “I have one thing to ask of you before Dolly comes down.”

“Yes? And that is—?” he said quietly.

“You will be good to her; she is all that I have in the world; she has always had her own way, and if she was not so sweet and so good my treatment would have spoiled her years ago; but Dolly is unspoilable; she is as good as she is pretty. She has had a sunny past, Philip, and I trust to you that there shall be no shadows, except those which are beyond human control, in the future.”

He looked very gallant and manly as he took his mother-in-law’s hands in his. “I will do my best, mother,” he said, “but I don’t believe in protestations, and I would rather not make any.”

A few minutes afterwards the bride herself appeared in the doorway. She had not committed the mistake of choosing too bride-like a travelling dress. She was from head to foot dressed in dark

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brown velvet which had masses of dark sable about it. On her sunny head she had a little toque of velvet and fur, with a great bunch of violets at one side. There were violets on her muff, too, and a great bunch of natural flowers pinned into the left side of her coat. She looked lovelier and happier even than she had done in her white bride's dress, and Greville went forward to meet her with a smile which did one's heart good to see.

A few moments passed in leave-taking; then Dolly exclaimed in her bright way, "Oh! Oh! I feel I am going to cry and I have no handkerchief. No—no"—feeling in her muff and the pocket of her jacket—"no, I have no handkerchief."

"Tell Parker to bring Mrs Greville a handkerchief," said Mrs Coningsby Browne to a young cousin who had acted as chief bridesmaid.

The girl went quickly out of the room, and a moment later the maid came in, carrying a handkerchief in her hand "Your handkerchief, madam," she said, offering it to Dolly.

"Oh, thank you Parker," said Dolly, sweetly.

Then my eye was caught by Philip Greville. He was staring with open-eyed amazement at the maid in her plain black dress, with her mask-like face framed in masses of ruddy gold hair. He staggered slightly as the maid's eyes moved from the bride's face to his; a deadly pallor overspread his countenance—his eyes were full of horror. Then he pulled himself together and took his wife by the arm. "Come," he said in an indescribably tender voice, "we shall miss our train if you don't hurry your

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leave-takings, and that would be a calamity too dire for words."

The bride's mother came forward, and there was a general rush for the doorway. I looked back in time to see Parker standing alone in the centre of the great drawing-room, clinging convulsively with one hand to the back of a high chair. She did not notice me—she seemed indeed only to be imbued with an intensity of feeling at the *rencontre* with Philip Greville. I was persuaded that Dolly had seen nothing, for she got into the carriage with a smile, and was waving her adieux with all the gaiety imaginable. No, she had seen nothing!

It was but a stone's throw to the station, and I had not intended to follow them thus far, but in my anxiety to see how Greville would comport himself I, two minutes later, found myself tearing after the carriage as hard as I could lay legs to ground.

In his anxiety to get his wife out of the house Greville had completely taken time by the forelock, and we found that some twenty minutes must elapse before the train was due. Everybody seemed to have a last word to say to the little bride, and somehow I found myself on the outskirts of the excited group which surrounded her, with Greville for my companion.

"Something has happened to upset you, Greville," I said. "You are as white as chalk; your hands are shaking! Can I do anything for you?"

"Colonel," he replied, "if you would do me a favour you would see my mother-in-law at once and tell her to get rid of that red-haired woman who brought down my wife's handkerchief just now. I

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don't want to go into details or to say things against a woman, but Mrs Coningsby-Browne would be better without her, and I cannot bring my wife back to my mother-in-law's house if that woman is in it."

"What has she been to you?" I asked.

"The very curse of my life," he replied instantly; "my evil genius. She is the one woman of all others that I have the most cause to fear and dread."

"Because—?" I began.

He looked full and square into my eyes. "Yes, I see that you know," he said, without any attempt at concealing the truth. "Because she is a bad woman—a wicked, unscrupulous, dangerous woman, who has haunted me for years. I don't know why she should be down here leading this kind of life, unless it was that she knew that I might be quartered here sooner or later. Even then, I don't in the least understand it; I only know that she must be got out of my mother-in-law's house at all and at any cost."

His tone was so earnest, his manner so sincere, his eyes so desperate and full of pleading, that I said what probably I should not have said to any other man in the world under similar circumstances, "You care for her still!"

He turned upon me fiercely. "Care for her!" he said. "Yes, as one cares for something that one knows is deadly and dangerous, as an absinthe drinker cares for the liquid which will one day consume him, as the moth cares for the candle. Love for her—as one speaks of love for such a woman as my wife—I have never known. She fascinates me in spite of myself. I feel that you are my friend, Colonel. Get her out of my way!"

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"Can you give me no better clue?" I said. "Come, pull yourself together, man—think! If I go to your wife's mother the whole fat will be in the fire from that moment; she is not a woman who could keep any secret; she is completely under this woman's domination; she believes in her. Give me some clue by which I can get rid of her by speaking to her direct."

He hesitated a moment, then there was a break in the group around the bride, and the best man approached us. "Come, old chap," he said, "it is time you took your place."

"All right! all right! I will come in one minute Colonel," he said hurriedly, turning back to me, "her real name is Lucy Forrester. Will you see her for me? Tell her that I have told you all her history—that if she does not leave my mother-in-law's house within forty-eight hours you have my instructions to go to the police."

"And if she says 'No'?"

"She won't say 'No,' Colonel. There is very little fear of that. If she does, go to the police station, tell them that Lucy Forrester of Great Stratton Street, Normanstown, is living in Melville Crescent, and ask them to communicate with the Normanstown police. That will be sufficient."

"I hate to do it," I said in a musing tone; "but still she will have the chance of getting away while there is yet time."

I promised him, as I wrung his hand, that I would do his bidding, and so thoroughly did I fulfil my bequest that I went straight back to the house in Melville Crescent and asked openly if I might speak

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to Parker. "I have a message for her," I said. "No, don't disturb Mrs Coningsby-Browne; Parker can do all that I wish."

In less than five minutes she was shown into the little sitting-room where I was awaiting her.

"I have brought a message from Mr Greville," I said quietly. "Doubtless you will understand it. He wishes you to leave Mrs Coningsby-Browne's service immediately."

She looked at me defiantly; she was very pale, and her eyes shone out almost green against the glory of her ruddy hair. "I see no reason why I should do that," she said haughtily.

"I cannot say, I am sure," I replied civilly, for after all she was a woman, and likely enough there had been passages in the past between her and Dolly Browne's husband. "I can only tell you that I promised my friend, Mr Greville, that I would see you immediately and give you his message. I have his instructions in the event of your refusal."

"What do you mean?" she gasped.

"Doubtless it needs no explanation," I replied, "but, believe me, it will be better if you follow his wishes in this respect. He does not intend to allow you to remain under his mother-in-law's roof; the wisest thing you can do is to leave it without demur."

For a moment she was silent, then she broke out, "Yes, I will leave it! What is the use of trying to keep straight? None. When once a woman has made a false step the whole of the past rises up and dogs her footsteps until she has no choice but to go back on the broad road to destruction. Colonel

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Jervis," she said, "you have seen me as a maid in this house—a servant. You have known my ladies intimately; you have never heard or seen a single thing that I have done which has not been just what I should do. I was a lady once. I speak three languages—"

"And you play the piano," I put in.

"Who told you that? Yes, I spend most of my spare time down at the music shop, playing for my pleasure—my one pleasure. I knew that it was hopeless to keep up my relations with Philip Greville—he would never have married me—and I—I wanted to be something better than his plaything, so I thought to hide myself here. But it was no use; the man that I once loved has hunted me down and driven me out into the world again. So I go, and upon Philip Greville's head be the weight of my destruction."

Of course it was very dramatic—very plausible, and there must have been some germs of truth in it, and yet—what about Lucy Forrester and the Normanstown police?

I had her promise that she would leave. I did not see the necessity—for, after all, she was a woman—of wounding her any further by disclosing to her that I knew her real name and place of identification. So I told her that I was very sorry to be the bearer of such a message, but that naturally I had not been able to refuse my friend's request, "particularly on such a day," I added. I added, too, that I was sure it was much better that she should quietly leave Mrs Coningsby-Browne's service. "You will have no difficulty in finding another place," I said. "Mrs

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Coningsby-Browne will, I am sure, give you the best of references."

"That is neither here nor there," she replied, brusquely. "I have promised to go and I will keep my word. I bid you good-day, sir."

The following morning I met poor dear Mrs Coningsby-Browne in the pine walk. She beckoned me to the side of her chair. "Oh, my dear Colonel Jervis," she exclaimed in tones of acute distress, "I am in such dreadful trouble!"

"I am sorry to hear that, Mrs Coningsby-Browne," I said soothingly; "and what is the matter?"

"Well, would you believe it, my dear, invaluable, perfect Parker has given me notice to leave at once! She is going to-morrow morning; she will not even stay till I get suited. She told me that she had a message from one very near to her, and that she must leave instantly. My dear, perfect Parker, whom I shall never replace, and whom I had hoped, now that I am left all alone in the world, almost to put into my dear Dolly's place, and to make her my companion instead of my waiting-woman. Colonel Jervis, you and all my friends in St Mildred's must be very kind to me; I have lost my daughter and I am losing my right hand. I believe," she added solemnly, "that she could not bear the house now with Dolly gone."

"Oh, no! no! she would have given you more time, Mrs Coningsby-Browne; doubtless she has her own reasons. Besides, Mrs Greville did not like Parker."

"Oh, Dolly had quite got over all that feeling," she cried emphatically.

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"Yet my experience is that it is no use trying to keep dependants who have once made up their minds to go. I have known two or three people who have tried it, but always failed. You will have to look out for another maid, and after a time you will forget all about Parker, and not be sorry that you have made a change."

"I think," said Mrs Coningsby-Browne, "that I shall really have to get married." She looked at me in a wistful kind of way with eyes that were shining with tears. "Nobody would look at me now that Dolly is gone," she said, strangling a sob.

I put out my hand. "If Parker's leaving causes you to make some good fellow happy, Mrs Coningsby-Browne," I said, "then the parting will not have been in vain."

She smiled at me through a mist of tears, and signed to the man to move onwards, leaving me standing there, thinking how wonderful are the powers of a gipsy and a woman's instinct!



THE STORY OF AN HONEST WOMAN

SHE was a beautiful creature. Somewhat of a lascivious type, a little too thick in the throat, and a good deal too large in the bust, and yet a very lovely woman. Many people wondered where Johnnie Armstrong had picked her up, and tales were as many as the sands of the sea as to the exact circumstances under which they had first met. It was freely said that her first husband had been, or still was, a sweep in Newcastle, and that she had basely deserted him for the uncertain glories of a life under the gas-lights of London. But of this there is a doubt, and it is more likely that the said original spouse was some kind of tradesman in a lucrative way of business than anything so work-a-day as a sweeper of chimneys.

It is certain, however, that the loveliness of Mrs Johnnie Armstrong first burst upon a London world in the somewhat limited area of an unlucky theatre. She had a small salary, a smaller part, and her very loveliness was, except in the eyes of the Manager himself, accounted as unrighteousness in the minds of most of those with whom she was brought into contact.

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It was a hard life at best. If she—and, by-the-bye, she was called Miss Rufford then—had left a luxurious and respectable home out of sheer wantonness, she certainly paid very dearly for her whistle. A woman, with two little children, who gets a salary of two pounds a week, has not much to play with when her food and lodging are paid for. Miss Rufford liked pretty clothes and finery as well as any pretty young woman in the unlucky Oberon, but, for a long time, she had to make shift with just as much, or as little, as would suffice for bare respectability, and no more. Then a new era set in. She attracted an admirer, someone who sat in the last row of the stalls beside a middle-aged lady with a rather wide parting and an aggressively tall tiara, someone who came along the following evening and sat in the front row this time, and who came yet again and again, and who sent chaste posies of flowers round to the stage-door, and who waited patiently for several nights until he had a favourable opportunity of speaking to her in a kind and fatherly sort of way, just passing the time of day and adding a little remark as to the impropriety of her going home alone.

She was new to her trade then, and she blushed a good deal, and thought somebody very kind to send her flowers, and still more kind to take her to have oysters and chablis at an expensive restaurant, the like of which she had never seen in all her life before. She loved oysters, this beautiful, luxury-loving little woman, and, though she would rather have had stout than chablis, she drank it because she guessed that it had cost four times as much as stout would have

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done. As a matter of fact, the chablis had cost a good deal more than that even, for this particular somebody never insulted his stomach with cheap wines. However, as Miss Rufford did not speak of its cost, it was all the same to him.

After that life was never quite the same for her. She bloomed out little by little, taking a cab where she had been wont to go a-foot, using scent on her handkerchiefs, presenting a more fashionable appearance generally, and being seen at various places of amusement such as may be patronised by those who are fixed in one place during the evenings. But somebody did not last out very long. Perhaps the lady with the tiara made discoveries, and put what is vulgarly known as "the stopper" on somebody's by-way diversions. Anyway, it is certain that somebody was missed after a time, and that his place was taken by a gentleman of Semitic appearance, who had some little difficulty in adapting his Hebrew-Teutonic tongue to the exigencies of the English language.

At this point in her career Miss Rufford set up a brougham. She explained the necessity of doing so with a lucidity which was very feminine. "I must save myself," she remarked to a fellow-actress at the Oberon. "You see, it isn't as if I was a rich woman, and I have my two little children to think of. They have no one but me to look to, and if I lose my place here owing to not taking care of my chest—and I have always had a weak chest, you know—where should I be, and where would they be, poor little things?"

Miss Florinda Belmont replied that she was perfectly right, and that she should set up a brougham

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to-morrow if her salary would allow of her doing so. And then Miss Rufford was called, and went away feeling that she had explained matters to the full satisfaction of her reputation. It was, perhaps, as well that she could not hear the remarks of her confidante when her back was turned. "Little idiot," she said contemptuously to another girl who dressed in the same room, "does she really think she blinds us about taking care of herself for the sake of her kids? Her ghost walks to the tune of two pounds a week, and you can't job a broom under twice that. Hers has got a stepper between the shafts and furs on the coachman. Pooh!"

"You ought to know something about brooms, Nellie," laughed the other girl; Florinda, by-the-bye, being a *nom de théâtre* kept strictly for the play-bills.

However, Miss Rufford went serenely on her way, happy in the assurance that her character was as spotless as that of her own little girl asleep at that moment in her cot in the pretty house in St John's Wood, to which she had lately removed herself and her belongings, and no one was unkind enough to tell her what people said when out of her presence. And she was really very popular both in and out of the theatre. She had an overwhelming desire always to do the right thing, she avoided treading on other people's toes, she was ready to lend a friend her best sables for a smart occasion, or a five-pound note with which to tide over some hiatus between ways and means; and she was ever ready to give full acknowledgment for any little service which might be rendered her.

"Katie Rufford isn't half a bad little thing,"

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remarked Miss Nellie (Florinda) Belmont to the Manager of the Oberon one day. "I'm glad you're putting her on a bit—she really does you credit."

"Miss Rufford won't be here much longer," returned the Manager, who was on the best of terms with the fair Florinda.

"No? How's that?" asked Florinda.

"Well, between you and me and the post," said the Manager, mysteriously, "I happen to know of a big piece of luck that is likely to fall in her way. But mum's the word, you know—keep it quite dark."

"Oh, yes, I know when to hold my tongue if anyone does," said Florinda. "So she's had a good chance, has she? I'm glad of it, though she has about as much talent for acting as a stuffed woman might have. I suppose it's her looks—she is a pretty creature. You'll never get anyone half as pretty again. Mark my words."

The Manager said no more, and did not explain matters further. It was a question of looks, but not in the way that Florinda had thought. For it was not a new manager that had come forward to give Miss Rufford another and a better chance, but another someone who had seen her from the stalls, and who was fairly dazzled by the luxuriance of her unusual loveliness. This someone was a young man better known in Society as Johnnie Armstrong. He was still young, fabulously rich, lord of many acres, of a gorgeous castle in Scotland, and a big steam yacht; and he was the husband of a wife who thought him the biggest fool she had ever known, and who did not mind saying so. They had not even met for about a couple of years, but Johnnie made her an

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ample allowance, and she preferred any country to England and any capital in Europe to London. It was an admirable arrangement, and worked with a smoothness which was almost incredible.

The very first time that Johnnie Armstrong saw Miss Rufford on the stage of the Oberon Theatre, he fell straightway under the spell of her charms. Indeed, so great was the influence she exercised upon him, that he acted precisely contrary to the ways which are accepted as usual under similar circumstances. For instance, instead of having recourse to chaste posies and the courtesies of the stage door, he sent a note to the Manager, with whom he had a slight acquaintance, asking him to give him a ten minutes' interview at any time during the performance. And when he was presently conducted to the great man's dressing-room—for, although the Oberon was an unlucky theatre, a manager is a great man in his own house—he at once unfolded his plans and invoked his help.

"The fact is," he said bluntly, "I've fallen over head and ears in love with Miss Rufford, and I want you to introduce me to her as soon as possible."

"I shall have to ask the lady's permission first," said the Manager, who never made his ladies cheap to the outside world.

"Oh, of course—of course. But taking for granted that she has no objection, I shall really be awfully obliged if you will. You see, I'm regularly gone—clean gone, in fact."

"You know her history, perhaps?" said the Manager, blandly.

"Not at all. I only know she's the loveliest

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woman I ever saw in my life," returned Johnnie Armstrong, eagerly.

Whereupon the Manager unfolded just as much of Miss Rufford's past as he deemed expedient, eliminating the Hebrew-Teutonic gentleman from the recital, and not remembering to mention the existence of the fatherly somebody who had first taught her to drink chablis with oysters in preference to stout. "I must go now. Will you stay here, or will you go in front again?" he asked. "Better stay; I'm not on long in this act."

So Johnnie Armstrong was left alone among the outward and visible signs of a career of nightly triumph and daily anxiety. And after a little while the great man came back again, gently shrugging his shoulders at the plaudits of the gallery.

"No, I'm not going back again," he said. "Peters, bring a bottle of champagne. Well, I hope you have not been bored to death? I suppose you have seen the piece before?"

"Never," said Johnnie Armstrong. "But I shall come to-morrow night, and I can sit it all out."

Then over their champagne they talked over Miss Rufford once more, and Johnnie unfolded his views for the future.

"You see, I'm rather queerly situated," he said, with some hesitation. "I've always been a square man,"—he was quite unaware that he had the reputation of being too utterly green to be anything else—"and I happen to be married. So, in any case, I cannot offer to marry Miss Rufford, but I am anxious that she should know exactly what my



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position is, and how I stand from the beginning. I haven't even seen my wife for more than two years, and if it were not that her allowance is applied for regularly by her solicitors, I should not know whether she was alive or dead. So, although I could not make Miss Rufford my wife, I can fairly well assure her that she would not be mixed up in any unpleasantness. Half the people I know don't know that I am married at all, and a good share of the other half neither know nor care whether my wife is living or not; and if she eventually came to me, I should and would make good settlements, appointing any trustees you and she might care to name."

The Manager could have laughed aloud at what he regarded as a work of distinct supererogation, but he moved not a muscle of his face as he replied with all the gravity of a judge giving sentence.

"Mr Armstrong," he said, "I cannot, of course, say what Miss Rufford may think of your proposal, though she cannot but be flattered by your admiration and your practical way of showing the same. You'll excuse me going on dressing, I know. Now, Peters, I can do without you—this gentleman and I are talking business. Well," with a change of tone as the dresser left the room, "I will introduce you to her, and the rest you must do for yourself. Afterwards, I shall be very glad indeed to act as her trustee if you still wish me to do so."

A few minutes later Johnnie Armstrong went back to his seat, safe in the Manager's promise to bring Miss Rufford to supper later on at the most

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expensive hotel in London, and the great man was left alone.

"Can I come in?" asked a voice at the door. "How are you, old chap? Who was that I met in the passage?"

"The biggest ass I ever came across in the whole course of my life," said the great man with emphasis.

Eventually Miss Rufford left the Oberon and disappeared from the ken of those who had known her, and about the same time there appeared in Paris a very beautiful woman, who was called "Mrs Johnnie Armstrong" by everyone who spoke of her, and by a few of those who were sufficiently familiar to address her in such a manner. She was very gentle and unassuming; she dressed exquisitely, and in very French style; wore few jewels, and had a sweet, shy manner which made nine people out of ten say what a lucky dog Johnnie Armstrong was to have such a charming wife. She and Johnnie were simply devoted to each other, and she was quite a success in the somewhat cosmopolitan world in which they moved. It is true that Mrs Johnnie Armstrong, though in an ordinary way she spoke in a quiet, subdued and refined voice, yet did upon occasion pronounce certain words a little too phonetically to be quite *de rigueur*; but this was a small defect, and did not affect many people. She always spoke of herself, both then and in the days which followed, as having had such a hard struggle for existence, "until dear Johnnie fell in love with me." "I owe everything in the world to Johnnie," she said one day to a somewhat important lady whose acquaintance she had made in the train going down to the Riviera.



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"I always feel that I can never do enough for him—he has been so good—so good to me."

This ecstatic state of things lasted for several years. The first Mrs Armstrong took the opportunity of asking for an increase in her allowance, and the gentleman at Newcastle promptly declined certain overtures which were made to him with a view to his seeking what is euphoniously called "the relief of the courts." And then the Johnnie Armstrongs came back to London, and lived a particularly quiet and unostentatious life, visiting among the friends whom they had made during their continental wanderings, and doing nothing which could in any way serve to attract notice or to identify Mrs Johnnie Armstrong with the insignificant young lady who had been known as Miss Rufford in the Oberon Theatre.

Yet they did not get on. They gave exquisite little dinners, for their visiting list did not allow of their giving large ones; they had everything in season and out of season—the choicest wines, wonderfully well-trained servants, the most charming house—yet they were not what could fairly be called successes. For one thing, an idea had crept out that it was a little premature to call the lady by the gentleman's name; for another, they were not able to be as careful what they put on the chairs as they could be, and were, as to what they put on the dishes. And to be a successful dinner-giver, you must combine the two powers.

And, unfortunately, she made mistakes. Johnnie Armstrong himself was not what could have been called an immaculate social guide, but he was not as



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inefficient as she was in these matters. To her, a title was a title, and when she came across new ones, she valued them according to the sound of them, and pretty often the sound of them was full of emptiness and folly signifying worse than nothing. For instance, she chanced one day to meet with a flat-nosed Marquise, who just then was glittering meretriciously through certain phases of society, and she straightway invited her to join a little dinner which she was giving that evening. The Marquise was rapidly acquiring a reputation for wearing lower gowns and drinking more brandy and soda than any other woman in London, but she sang a little in a showily, vulgar way, and that, together with the fact that London is very big and very careless, was enough to carry her quite triumphantly for the time along a stream of social engagements.

But the dinner had been given in honour of a lady with whom Mrs Johnnie Armstrong had become quite friendly by the shores of the sun-lit Mediterranean two years before. She was a woman of great importance in her own county, not knowing much of London, and judging everything and everyone by her own code of morality. Mrs Johnnie had artlessly disarmed her by a recital of dear Johnnie's goodness and her own everlasting gratitude therefor; but in one fell moment the Marquise undid all the anxious work of years. The sight of the flat, bold face, and the fleshy, undraped back were enough, and long before the champagne had begun to take effect, Mrs Paget-Molyneux had determined to put her pen through the Armstrongs' names, which she had only that morning included in the list of those whom she

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had intended to ask to stay with her for the next hospital ball in her own far-away county town.

We will draw a veil over the bitter experience of that fatal evening. It was but one of a type. The Marquise outshone herself; not just at first, you know, but after the wine had been round a few times, and she began to feel at home and comfortable.

She was certainly the life and soul of the party, but it was the soul of a demon, so to speak, and with each risky story the form of Mrs Paget-Molyneux grew stiffer and her countenance more forbidding, until at last she asked pointedly for her carriage in a way which was unmistakable.

"She'll never come again!" whispered Mrs Johnnie Armstrong to her lord.

"What the deuce did you ask her for?" he whispered back savagely, indicating the Marquise by a look.

"I don't know," returned she, with almost a sob.

They had their first quarrel that night after their guests, including the doubtful Marquise, were gone. Johnnie said hard things to her, and she reproached him with not having the right people round them, and for a time they went at it hammer and tongs, like any husband and wife in the New Cut.

And then she began to cry. "It's all your fault, Johnnie," she wept. "I was poor, and had to work hard before you came into my life, but I wasn't sniffed at. Of course, I know just how it is. Everybody knows we're not really married—they know there's a little something against me, and they sniff



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at everything I do and say and look. I'm sure at lunch, at Lady Emily's to-day, they told stories ten times worse than anything the Marquise said to-night."

Johnnie Armstrong groaned. He had just lost his temper, and had roundly upbraided her for having asked a woman to dinner of whom she knew absolutely nothing ; but he loved her too well, and was as yet too chivalrous to wound her by saying plainly that, if Lady Emily had happened to be still in her natural position, she would have seen her at Jericho before she would have invited her to make one of a lunch or any other kind of party.

"Well, don't let us quarrel about anybody or anything," he said desperately ; "after all, we've got each other, and what does it matter whether we have one sort of people to dinner or another sort ?"

"It's all because we're not—"

"Yes, I know," he broke in impatiently. He did not want to hear the truth put into words even by her.

"But it's always happening," she cried piteously. "Dear, dear Johnnie, can't you manage to get the other two squared somehow ? I shall never be really happy until I am safely married. Everybody will be nice enough to us then. It's so horrid feeling shut out of everything,—and—and, dear Johnnie—you will have another try to bring it about, won't you ?"

And Johnnie promised, as any man would have done in similar circumstances. For, mind you, he

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loved this beautiful woman with all his heart, though having got her in possession, he cared not twopence-ha'penny whether they gave or went to dinner-parties, and would cheerfully have passed the rest of his existence on a desert island so long as she was with him.

He had tried many, many times before, and always without success; but this time fortune favoured him, and his men of business told him, after a short interval, that the gentleman at Newcastle was not altogether indisposed to taking such a course as would set him free from the lady who was now known to the world at large as Mrs John Armstrong.

And in due time that same gentleman was as good as his word, and the divorce was applied for and granted, and no one who chanced to con over the account which appeared in the daily papers was any the wiser, or thought of connecting it in any way with the beautiful Mrs Johnnie Armstrong.

Yet it seemed as if they had approached no nearer to the fulfilment of Mrs Johnnie's desires. The first Mrs Johnnie absolutely refused to have anything to say to such an arrangement.

"Why should I trouble myself to go through the fuss of a divorce suit?" she asked of her lawyers, when they sounded her as to her views. "I don't want to marry again, and I am quite content to let Johnnie go his own way so long as he pays my allowance regularly. I suppose it's a fad of this woman to feel she really is his wife. They all seem to crave for that distinction—poor souls. If they



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only knew what a ghastly bore it is being married to these dull, stupid men !”

“I believe, as a matter of fact, that it is the chance of an heir being born,” said the lawyer, quietly. “You see, Mrs Armstrong, if Mr Armstrong dies without heirs, the property all goes to his brother, Henry. As you know, John and Henry have not been friends—”

“They always hated one another,” cried Mrs Armstrong.

“Yes, that is so.”

“I always hated Henry Armstrong, too,” the lady went on in an intensely bitter tone. “I remember his once telling me that I—bah! I won’t think about him, or annoy myself with him. Yes, I hated him always. Look here, tell poor old Johnnie that if he will arrange to settle my allowance so that I have it to the end of my life, whether I choose to marry again, or to go on the streets if I like, I’ll do what he wishes, and will take steps to set him free.”

“But you mustn’t speak of it in that way,” exclaimed the lawyer in alarm.

“Pooh!” cried she, scornfully, “you should never humbug either your lawyer or your doctor—it’s not fair to ask people to work in the dark. You can put it in what roundabout phraseology you please. That’s your affair, not mine.”

It is not necessary to go into the details of what followed. It is sufficient to say that the time came when no one stood between Mrs Johnnie and her heart’s desire, and that one morning a quiet little ceremony took place in a gloomy London church

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which made her an honest woman, and she was more proud of the fact than if she had suddenly found herself transformed into a duchess.

It was with a strange feeling of exhilaration that Mrs Johnnie found herself once more in London at the beginning of the season. She had made many new friends during the preceding winter, which she and Johnnie had spent in Cairo. She felt that there was now no reason why she should not stand up and look the whole world in the face; she felt that she was as good as anyone else. Besides, she had learned a great deal during the past year or two. She knew the difference between real titles and "Marquises"—none better. She had no notion of her house being filled with people of doubtful reputation; it was quite bad enough to have a doubtful past of your own, without burdening yourself with the shady antecedents of others. "Better the devil you do know than the devil you don't," was a favourite saying of Mrs Johnnie's, and she acted up to it.

Her greatest ambition was to become a popular hostess, not among the spheres wherein "Marquises" glittered, but in what she called "real" Society. She took an infinitude of pains to attain to her ideal. She invoked the aid of several of the most powerful leaders of Society, and she made it worth their while to give her substantial assistance. You know how these things are done in London. It is quite easy—if only you are rich enough and wily enough to take the tide when it serves. Mrs Johnnie was rich enough, and she gave dinners and dances, breakfasts and suppers, supported the right people's pet charities, took a house at Ascot, and had a yacht at

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Cowes, and entertained right royally. And in return the best—or almost the best—people took her up and shed the light of their Society countenance upon her, and if only she had kept right on she would have been a living example of the quotation which says, "All things come to him who knows how to wait."

As it was, she got tired of it all. You see, poor soul, she had not been born to it. She in time acquired such a name for being the pink of propriety that those who dined at the big house in Park Lane would as soon have dreamed of standing on their heads as of making a joke, and the men who lived and moved and had their being wholly and solely as diners-out and makers of smart conversation saved all their good stories for less conventional houses than Mrs Johnnie's.

It lasted a whole season. Nowhere could you see things better done, a fortune was spent on flowers and opera stars, there was no flirting to be seen—all was proper, decorous, and as dull as ditch-water. Then someone woke up to the fact that no one of importance ever went twice to Mrs Johnnie Armstrong's, and that she herself was often seen to stifle a yawn when her rooms were filled with guests whose place in the world was irreproachable, and whose *entrée* to St James's was sure. And after a time the end came.

"You've heard the news, old chappie?" a man about town said to a friend one night. "What, you haven't! By Jove! Well, that pretty Mrs Johnnie Armstrong has bolted with young Singleton, of the Blues. Ever go to one of her parties? I did

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once—never was at anythin' so damn dull in my life. She used to be larky enough when she was Miss Rufford, of the Oberon, but bein' an honest woman was too much for her; she hadn't the head to carry it."

A LITTLE MYSTERY

THE Royal Prevention Company of the city of Dochfurley had hit upon a new idea. Insurance of various kinds is the fashion. The careful man can insure anything, from his life, the risk of taking certain infectious diseases, accidents, and against burglary, to his carriage, his horses, his cattle and his crops; in short, there is little that cannot be insured. But the Royal Prevention Company of Dochfurley, that canny city away in the far north, whose inhabitants are so sharp that they are frequently accused of cutting one another, and occasionally themselves into the bargain, had hit upon a distinctly new idea.

Nothing is more annoying than to lose a bunch of keys; the inconvenience and the danger are fairly equalised — inconvenience because, if irretrievably lost, the owner of the keys may have to spend quite a sum of money in picking locks and replacing each separate key, because the most important papers and possessions may be made unget-at-able for a time, home may be cut off, and many other troubles follow upon the loss of a bunch of keys; danger because they may be picked up near your house, or stolen

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from your house, and you are placed at the mercy of a dishonest and wicked world. So the Royal Prevention Company of Dochfurley hit upon the idea of insuring bunches of keys. For the paltry sum of a shilling any owner of a bunch of keys might take out a policy, which would hold good for twelve months, and which would practically ensure the return of any bunch of keys lost in an ordinary way.

Having thought out their scheme to a working basis, the Royal Prevention Company of Dochfurley proceeded to flood the United Kingdom with leaflets on the subject of insuring bunches of keys; and they also advertised for persons of either sex to represent them in every large city.

Now it happened that in a dingy house in one of the side streets off the Edgware Road there dwelt two young students. Shall I call them students? The one was painting in an art school in Pimlico, the other was occupied in storming the newspaper offices and any very likely outlet for literary effusions. Both were very young, both were determinedly ambitious, and at the time of which my little history speaks both were impecunious to a highly inconvenient and painful degree. The two friends, seventeen and eighteen years old, were in solemn conclave in their poorly-furnished attic.

"Two-and-threepence ha'penny," said Jim Grover, counting over a line of silver and copper coins which lay on the table in front of him. "Two-and-threepence ha'penny. Rent due on Monday—not another farthing till the end of the month."

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"And this is only the seventeenth," said Herbert Ferriby.

"Well, Bertie," said Jim, "I don't know how we're going on. We must eat—we needn't drink—we must eat; tea and coffee costs something. I can't get on any further for want of paints."

"Can't you get some paints at the little shop round the corner?"

"I owe thirty shillings. God knows when I shall pay it."

"Well, I tell you what it is, old chap," said Bertie. "It's all very well, but living for Art doesn't exactly pay. Now listen to me. Suppose while we're working for Art—which is an excellent thing in its way, and is worth working and even starving for—suppose we do something to eke out existence until we're in a position to make money, both of us?"

"Yes. But what? What are we fit for?" asked Jim, looking up from fingering the meagre row of coins.

"I don't know that we're fit for anything," said Bertie, gloomily. "Where's that paper I brought in last night? I picked it up in the 'bus; some chap left it behind. I suppose I oughtn't to have taken a 'bus," he ended with a sigh.

"It's as broad as it's long," said the other. "If you leg it everywhere, it takes it out of your boots. It's more economical to use the 'bus, particularly if you get a good long ride for a penny."

"Here's the paper. Now let's see if there's anything," said Bertie. He ran his finger down the columns of the flimsy pink paper until he came to the particular class of advertisements that he was in

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search of. "Here's something in our way," he said, scanning the lines quickly. "Oh, by Jove! here's something still better. Listen to this:—

"WANTED, LADIES AND GENTLEMEN in every city in the United Kingdom to work for Insurance Company. New necessity. Likely to be taken up by all classes. Anyone with even a small acquaintance can make a few shillings weekly.—Write for full particulars to Royal Prevention Company, Dochfurley, N.B.'"

"They don't even say send a stamped envelope," said Jim. "I wonder what it is. Yours is the best fist, so you write to-day and find out."

In due time when the row of coins had still further dwindled, a letter arrived in the shabby house in Drury Street setting out full particulars of the new scheme. The two boys read the circular with closest attention.

"Not much in it," said Bertie. "They want us to take out a policy for our own keys. Likely, when we've got the wherewithal as low as it is now, that we shall spend a shilling of it in insuring our own keys. My keys!" he went on. "Ha, ha! The key of my trunk, the latch-key, the key of the shed where we keep our bicycles. What have you got?"

"Latch-key," answered Jim, "bicycle house—two boxes—and my locker at the studio."

"Ah, yes; you're better off for keys than I am. Do you think you could get any shillings at the studio?"

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"I don't know. I don't mind trying. You see, after all, you get a very decent percentage, and I know a good many people of sorts in London, people to whom a shilling wouldn't be much. It's better than selling tea."

"Selling tea?" echoed Bertie.

"Yes, one of the fellows at the studio ekes out his living by selling tea; and another one goes in for a special brand of cigarettes."

"Ah, you have the advantage over me," said Bertie. "At the studio you fellows are all chums; or, at all events, if you're not personal chums, you're chummy with one another. Excepting you, old chap, I never meet any fellow that I am on chummy terms with. You walk into an office in search of work; you only see a few jack-a-dandies doing watch-dog, and they're told to keep you off—and they do it."

"But you know lots of people in town. Come now, more than I do."

"Lots of people!" said Bertie, bitterly. "Do I?"

"Well, you know Flossie Desborough."

"Yes, I know Flossie Desborough."

"She must have a bunch of keys."

"I daresay she has."

"You might as well ask her; it's doing her a favour."

"I don't like doing it," said Bertie.

"Oh, I don't see that. If you want to live, and you want to make money, you must put your pride in your pocket, otherwise there's nothing but a corner for it—until the dibs begin to come in, that is."

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Well, in the end the two friends went round on a sad little pilgrimage among the houses of their friends, who were not very many nor very influential, and at the end of the first week, between them, they had got twenty persons to take up the new insurance. This added a trifle to their exchequer, a trifle that was indeed very welcome ; but so many people asked Jim Grover whether he had insured his own keys, that he determined to do it on the principle that it was ridiculous to ask other people to take a precaution which you neglected yourself. Consequently he filled up, in his own name, one of the forms which he had induced others to accept during the past few days, and on to his modest bunch of keys he slipped, by means of the split ring it had attached, a little oblong label bearing a number, and the name of the Royal Prevention Company at Dochfurley.

"Poor old Bertie!" his thoughts ran, as he played idly with the bunch of keys. "I don't wonder he hates it as he does. He's so proud. That comes of having a father on the Council of India, with eighteen bearers, and all that sort of thing, and then, after all, coming down to live in a dingy street off the Edgware Road, and in the attics of that, and to cadging around among one's friends for a commission that brings one in a pittance like this. Ah, poor old chap, I don't wonder he hates it so!"

And then, as he sat there, some wandering devil of evil slipped unbeknown into Jim Grover's heart ; a curious, twisted ray of light seemed to shine in upon him.

"Gad!" he ejaculated, "that would be an easy way of making a few shillings. Of course, it isn't quite

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square, but when your starving—it isn't like taking it from an individual. It's no different to what they do on the Stock Exchange when they buy for a rise, and sell anticipating a fall."

For some minutes Jim Grover sat staring at the reverse side of the oblong disc, on which an inscription ran thus : " Any person finding this bunch of keys and taking it to the police station will receive five shillings reward, payable by the company after identification of owner."

That was the beginning of a long course of deception. It is not necessary for me to go into the actual details of how these two struggling boys managed to make money out of the Royal Prevention Company of Dochfurley ; suffice it to say that every week three or four bunches of keys were lost and found within the metropolitan area always necessitating a visit to a different police station. It was no such great find in the way of theft, but it did manage to keep two starving bodies and two ambitious souls together, and for some time the Royal Prevention Company of Dochfurley continued to pay the five shillings reward without any question. Then a communication was received by Jim Grover saying that the company had noticed that a very large percentage of his clients were unfortunate in losing their keys. Jim Grover wrote back that he was sorry, that it was true, but his acquaintance was largely among the student class. The company promptly withdrew the appointment, but all the same, for some weeks Jim continued to insure bogey bunches of keys and to claim an illicit reward.

And then one fine morning Bertie Ferriby

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came in, jubilantly triumphant, having been appointed sub-editor of a not very important weekly journal at a salary of twenty-five shillings a week.

"Jim, old chap," he said, "you've stood by me, even to running the risk of getting into quod. Now you'll stop that business, and as soon as we can scrape the money together we'll repay it with interest."

"I can't live upon you," said Jim, sullenly. "It's easy enough to go on a little longer."

"No, old chap, it's gone against the grain with you as much as it has gone against the grain with me. We're friends—we're pals—we've stood by each other for better or worse ever since we've left school, and I'm not going to make any change now, when I've struck ile at last. One of these days you'll paint a picture that will set the world on fire.

"Never!" said Jim. "Never!"

"Perhaps not. Till you get to that point—which won't be this side of ten years—you'll get in with some small dealer, and you'll paint little bits and live by that."

It was six months after this that the Royal Prevention Company of Dochfurley received a curious anonymous letter, enclosing postal orders amounting to four pounds. The writing was obviously assumed.

"I have been your agent," the letter ran, "and under great pressure I admit that I have not been quite square with you. I owe you three pounds fifteen. I enclose you four pounds in lieu of interest, and beg to thank you very heartily for the loan of

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money, which, in a time of hard pressure, saved me from starvation.”

“Well,” said the official who received and read the letter, “that’s the queerest thing I ever heard of. I wonder how the dickens he managed it.”

A SILVER TOKEN

CHAPTER I

"Of course you said *no*?" said Mrs Desmond.

Her voice rang across the glowing atmosphere of the firelit room like an east wind cutting through the air.

"I—I didn't say no," came the reply. The voice of the girl who answered was very soft and low; it was also firm and decided. "I said yes."

"You didn't say *yes*?" shrieked the mother.

"I did. I meant yes."

"And you mean to tell me that Ralph Byrne had the impertinence, the audacity, the unparalleled impudence to offer you—what?"

"He offered me Ralph Byrne."

"Why, the man hasn't got a penny!"

"He will have."

"Will have! Will have! We shall all be in our quiet graves a little later on, and then things will be equal, whether we have fared luxuriously, or starved in what these modern fanatics call our 'earth life.' I have finished with you, Madeline, finished with you."

"I can't help it, mother," she said. There was a

A Silver Token

gleam of tears in the great violet eyes upturned from the low seat which surrounded the fire.

"You can't help it. This is the reward of all I have done for you children; this is all the return that you make to me for my sacrifice years and years and years together. If I hadn't so considered you children's future, if I hadn't denied myself and pinched myself, and striven to keep up as good a position as we had when your father was alive, you would have been proper helpmeets for men like Ralph Byrne."

"I can't help it, mother." The voice was wavering a little, there was the sound of tears in the soft and yet decided tones; indeed, the girl was very near to breaking down altogether.

"Ralph Byrne!" Mrs Desmond went on. "Ralph Byrne! What is he going to keep you on?"

"He is going to make money."

"Oh! is he? That kind of man is always *going to* make money; he never gets there; he never makes it. You are nineteen; you are the eldest but one of my five daughters, and to you and Georgie I naturally look for a suitable example to set before the others. And all you do for me is to engage yourself to Ralph Byrne. I'm ashamed of you, Madeline."

"I can't help it, mother. I—I—got fond of him. I don't think there's anybody in the world like him. I—I'd rather—yes, I would honestly, mother—live on twopence a day with Ralph than I'd marry a millionaire who was somebody else."

"And you might have married Sir George Stanton," said Mrs Desmond, bitterly.

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"Oh, mother, how could I marry Sir George? He's so fat."

"Fat!" echoed her mother.

"Yes, mother, so fat. And he is so podgy, and so prosy. There wouldn't be a bit of romance or anything else."

"Romance," repeated Mrs Desmond, "romance! My dear child, answer me this: Will romance buy you such a gown as you have on at this moment? Will romance give you such a luncheon as you ate to-day? Will romance provide you with a maid? Will romance take you to Paris, take you to London; give you the thousand and one things that you are accustomed to? No, no, no! Think what you will be like when he is working to make money; living in a grubby little house on the Tolbridge Road, with one grubby little servant and half a dozen children; doing your own cooking, doing half your own washing, tramping up and down your bedroom at night with a baby, and such a very small bedroom that it will have very little tramping room. Oh, I haven't patience with you!"

"But, mother."

"Well?"

"We shouldn't be married until he is in a position."

"A position! I should think his ideas of a position are very different to yours or mine. I don't believe in long engagements; I don't believe in a cruel waste of the best years of a woman's life waiting while a man achieves success. It is a wrong thing. A man has no right to ask a girl to marry him, or be engaged to him—which isn't at all one and the same—unless he can provide her a home

A Silver Token

which is at least as good as the one that she is living in. I have known more than one girl, Madeline, who waited years for a man, and then the man married somebody younger, fairer, wealthier. I knew one girl," she went on, speaking in her well-bred, cruel voice, "I knew one girl who had a lover. She was a cousin of mine. She's dead now, poor thing; you never knew her. He was a handsome man, with a way with him, just such another as Ralph Byrne. They got engaged; they were so much in love that time was nothing. He was willing to wait seven years for Rachel; and in the end Rachel waited seven years for her Jacob. And when the seven years was over, she was willing and ready to wait seven more. And he married—*Leah*."

"Well?" said Madeline; her voice quivered a little in spite of herself. "Well?"

"It *wasn't* well. Leah was the daughter of his chief. Marriage with her meant a partnership, but it did not mean waiting another seven years and getting Rachel at the end of them. There is no marriage of that kind in our country. She lived just seven years, and on Jacob's seventh wedding-day she died."

There was a long silence. The smart silver kettle on the tea-tray hissed and bubbled merrily; the cinders dropped one by one on the hearth; and at last Madeline Desmond spoke,—

"I never knew that you had such a story as that in your family, mother," she said. "I wonder you never told us. Was that cousin Agnes?"

"Yes, that was my cousin Agnes. She was thirty-five when she died; she might have been twice thirty-

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five in everything but the texture of her skin and the abundance of her hair. I never can bear to think about my cousin Agnes. If I could have killed that man I would have done it. I met him, the last time I was in London, at an evening party Lenore and I were at. It was one night you had a headache, and you said you would sit quietly by the window and go to bed early. It turned me over to see him. To think of that broken heart, of all those crushed and broken illusions! Can you wonder that I am not glad to welcome Ralph Byrne to be a Jacob to my Rachel? You think I'm hard, you think I'm cruel, you think I'm worldly. Perhaps I am."

"I—I didn't say so," said Madeline; "I never said so. And I quite see what you mean; I quite understand why you should speak and think as you do; but I don't think that Ralph will ever treat me like that."

"Neither did Agnes O'Connor. Up to the end of the seven years I wouldn't have ventured to say one word against Jacob. And yet he left her. He married—*Leah*."

CHAPTER II

BEFORE she changed her dress for dinner that night, Madeline Desmond sat down at the little writing-table in her bedroom and wrote a note. It was to Ralph Byrne.

So the following afternoon found Ralph Byrne in possession of the quaint Dutch summer-house when Madeline Desmond arrived to keep the tryst.

A Silver Token

"Something has happened?" he said to her.

"Yes, everything has happened. It's no use you going to mother, Ralph. She'll not hear of an engagement between us."

"But why?"

"It's a long story. But I feel she has right on her side. I feel that I have no business to give her the anxiety that an engagement between us would be. I—oh, you don't know what it is to me to give you up. I am not like most girls of my age. I'm not like my sisters. They've had a dozen sweethearts apiece—even the twins, who are only just promoted to the dignity of long frocks, and are not yet out of the schoolroom. I never had any favourite boys; I'm not like them; but I see that it won't do. Last night—I'll tell you all about it."

Then she told him the whole story that her mother told her the night before. "Can you wonder," she wound up, "that mother is so dead against long engagements?"

"No, I can't wonder. I can't forget that I've nothing to offer you—nothing but myself. It's no use my protesting that I shouldn't change. Who knows? I might. I suppose this Jacob, as you call him, didn't set out with the idea of marrying anybody but Rachel. But look here, Madeline, I sha'n't be in Blankhampton many days longer. You know that I'm going back to town to grind; and I *will* grind. If you forget me, I'll never reproach you. If you marry some other fellow—well, it will be better that we found it out sooner rather than later. I bought you an engagement ring this morning. I was rather

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extravagant over it. I suppose it wouldn't be quite fair to ask you to take it?"

"Let me see it," said she.

He took it out of his pocket. It was a thick gold ring set with a large sapphire and two diamonds, just a broad band such as a man might wear.

"Put it on your own finger," she said; "and if you are able to come back, you can give it to me then."

"I wish you could have taken it," he said, "even if you couldn't wear it."

"What's the good of having a thing I can't wear? Look here, what is that little silver heart you wear on your watch-chain? It's an absurd thing for a man to wear."

"That? Oh, it has no tender memories. My old nurse gave it to me when I was a mere boy and had my first watch and chain. She got it in India somewhere. Her husband was a soldier, and she had followed the drum with him all over the world. She's dead and gone years ago. Will you have it?"

"Yes, I could take that. Nobody would ask any questions. I'll put it on one of my silver bangles, and it will be something to remind me of you when you are gone."

•It was wonderful how stoical these two young people were. Anybody listening to their conversation would have thought that they were quite indifferent as to whether they met again or not; but there is an indifference which covers a tragedy of suffering. Madeline stayed in the old Dutch summer-house until the winter dusk was falling, and then they said good-bye to each other—a literal good-bye—and then they tore themselves apart, and the girl went

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home alone with all her love frozen at the fountain head, and the man turned back into the summer-house and sat there motionless until the calls of the gardeners to clear the grounds roused him and made him, too, seek the shelter of his hotel.

Oh, these partings! Oh, the bitter black blank of looking forward over years which must be unilluminated by the smile of the only one who makes life worth living! Oh, the wrenching apart of twin souls, the tearing asunder of true affinities! Well, well, parting is always the same all the world over. Men and women who believe themselves very much in love suffer just as much in parting as those whose hearts have been enslaved for all time; but oh, the difference in the years that follow! Oh, the length of the years when the heart is elsewhere than with the body! The wrench of parting is as the drawing of a tooth—agony for the moment—but it is the everlasting pain which sometimes follows which frets away youth as moth doth fret out a garment.

Madeline Desmond went straight home from the the Winter Garden. She found her mother alone. It was not a very usual circumstance that Mrs Desmond should be alone at that hour, but the other girls had gone their different ways, and Mrs Desmond, who was suffering from a chill, was in the house alone.

"I want to tell you, mother," said Madeline, when she had thrown aside her wraps and had taken her cup of tea from her mother's hand, "that I've been with Ralph this afternoon."

"Yes?" Mrs Desmond looked up sharply.

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"I've told him that it is quite impossible for us to be engaged."

"You have not tied yourself in any way?"

"Not in any way, mother—neither he nor I."

"My dear child," said Mrs Desmond, "you won't regret this. If he goes away and forgets, it is better that you should know now—at least, you will find it better that you have not waited. It is such a slur on a woman to be plighted for years and forsaken. You can't hide an engagement; you can't explain it away when it's broken as Jacob broke his."

"Is his name Jacob—his real name?" She asked the question not because she wanted to know, but because she wanted to draw the conversation away somewhat from her own case.

"No. His name—I don't feel inclined to tell you. It wouldn't do you any good to know it. I would rather never stain my lips by uttering it. His name is well known. He is a highly honoured man in a distinguished position."

"Is he happy?"

"How could such a man be happy? I never saw—Leah until that night last season. I looked at him for an instant, just enough to convey to him that he was not to dare to speak to me, and then I turned and looked at her from head to foot, and I looked back at him. One glance at his scarlet face, although they've been married for twenty years, was enough to show me what kind of happiness is his portion. Whatever it is, it's more than he deserves."

"Yes, I quite agree with you," said Madeline; "I quite agree with you, mother. And now will you do something for me?"

A Silver Token

"If I can."

"I want you to regard the incident as closed. Please don't speak about it. The girls don't know that he had any serious idea of marrying me, and if I'm not worried about it I shall get over it—at all events it won't hurt quite so much."

"I haven't spoken of it to a soul, Madeline," said Mrs Desmond, keeping her eyes very intently upon her cup, which she was engaged in filling, "and I shouldn't dream of speaking of your private affairs to your sisters, any more than I should, under similar circumstances, of theirs to you. You may trust me, Madeline. I know that I must have seemed hard and worldly to you. I don't like you to feel that I am that."

"I haven't said so," said Madeline.

"So you told me last night. You haven't said so, but you haven't yet told me that you haven't thought so."

"I don't think," said Madeline, "that I have even thought it. I—I could talk to you better in a year's time, or a month, or a week. Just now I am sore and hurt. I feel like the child who wanted to buy the jeweller's shop with half a crown. You must give me a little while to get over it, and to get back to my natural state of—"

"Of what?" said the mother, almost piteously.

"Well, perhaps of unfeelingness. At all events," she went on, "I can tell you this for your comfort, mother—that I would rather you had told me all that was in your mind; I would rather that you, having such a story in your own experience, should tell me the truth. Girls aren't told enough of the truth

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nowadays, I don't know what they used to be. According to tradition a girl was like a sheet of white paper until she was married. I don't know how it worked ; it doesn't work now. I suppose the new condition of things has altered everything, but I know that I would rather be told the very worst than be left merely to take my chance of what might or might not happen to me. And I'll never reproach you, mother, come what may."

After that evening the mother and daughter never reverted to the subject of Ralph Byrne. He called and left a card with a small "P.P.C." in the corner when he knew that Mrs Desmond would not be at home; and then he turned his back upon Blankhampton, that quaint old city of churches and ancient buildings, and went back to the busy life from which he had come.

And time went on. Time, how much of it? Does it matter? Time is, or should be, according to how you measure it. At the Bar, where Ralph Byrne was wooing fortune, fifteen years is looked upon as a mere apprenticeship. As a matter of fact, five whole years had gone by since Madeline Desmond and Ralph Byrne had parted in the old Dutch summer-house in the Winter Garden at Blankhampton; five long years, during which not one word had come to tell her that he remembered her existence.

"My dear Madeline," said Mrs Desmond one day, "do you think you are wise to refuse Major Endicott?"

"Oh, I don't know, mother. Perhaps I am not very wise. I don't mean to marry him, if that's what you want to know."

A Silver Token

"But why not? He's so nice, so wealthy, so well-born."

"Yes, I know, dear; but he doesn't suit me."

"It seems such a pity," said Mrs Desmond, wistfully. "Not that I would persuade you, Madeline, not at all; only you are four-and-twenty."

"And if I were four-and-thirty, or four-and-forty, I should say the same. He's very fine and large, mother, but he's not for me—most emphatically not for me, darling. You have got your Georgie married, and Lenore married, and little Avis; it won't be long before José follows the example of Avis, and then you'll have nobody but me to look after you and see that you are comfortable and happy, and that you get a good time. Don't you think you and I were made for each other?"

"No, I don't," said Mrs Desmond, shortly. "When you are married I look forward to having a very gay time. I shall have five married daughters to visit, and five sets of grandchildren to visit me. I shall have the gayest time that I have ever had in my life. The idea of two lone women in a big house like this is too terrible."

"But, dear, you have four married daughters to visit now, and we shall have four sets of grandchildren to visit us."

"It's no use talking to me, Madeline. I should like you to marry, but not until you meet the right man."

"When I meet the right man, I'll marry him, I promise you. Have another egg?"

"No, thanks."

"Have some potted shrimps, or some of this *foie gras*?"

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"A little of the *foie gras*," said Mrs Desmond. "Oh, is that you, José? Well, you are late."

"Yes, dear, I am very late," said José, in a small, meek voice. "But I was so tired this morning. I danced such a lot last night. I'm sleepy yet."

"My dear child, you should have slept yourself out and had your breakfast in bed. Did you really have a good time?"

While the two were discussing the previous evening's dance, Madeline picked up the newspaper. The first words that struck her were those at the head of a column—*The Silver Heart*.

She put the paper down as if she had been stung. Oh, why did she ever think about him? Why did she carry that silver heart always on her left wrist? Because she was a fool, a fool. It was the old story of Jacob and Rachel over again. No, she wouldn't be weak: it was against her principles to be weak. She was a strong woman.

So she took up the newspaper again, and saw that *The Silver Heart* was the title of a play, a play that had been produced the previous evening in London, a play that had taken the world by storm, a play by an utterly unknown author, an author who had no *nom de guerre*, who did not appear at the production in response to the calls of "Author!" who preferred to keep his identity an absolute secret.

"There's some lucky Madeline somewhere," she said to herself as she put the paper down.

And where was the lucky Madeline? Well, as a matter of fact, she happened that very morning to be walking down St Thomas's Street at Blankhampton. She had half a dozen commissions to

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execute; her mind was intent upon them. She was never on the look out for young men, as the majority of girls are in cathedral cities, and when somebody stopped and said, "Madeline, don't you know me?" she gave a little start—a little cry. "I see," he said, "that you are wearing the silver heart that I gave you. Did you see the paper this morning? I didn't find the Bar quick enough, Madeline. I—I took the silver heart for a guerdon. I've got there, Madeline! Where are you going? What are you doing? Let's go up to the Dutch summer-house, Madeline, and I'll tell you all about it."

ANNE CHICHESTER'S STORY

HER friends said that she was "breezy"; her enemies dubbed her "an irritating old cat." This was malicious, because Anne Chichester was not old, and she was assuredly not irritating, and, as Zilla Walton remarked one day to a little group of people who had been steadily running down Miss Chichester, "it isn't often that cats can be called breezy."

Fortunately for Miss Chichester she had many friends and but few enemies. Not that it would have made any material difference to her, because she was well endowed with this world's goods, and she was blessed with a fine spirit of independence, and did not care a snap of the fingers for the opinion of anyone.

Now it happened that in Bridgeway, where Miss Chichester lived, there were not many wholly independent women. True, there were the two old ladies at the Holt, but then they were so old that they were entirely out of the reckoning. There was Miss Molyneux, of Bridgeway Park, but she never took any notice of anybody in the town, not even of the great Mrs Chamberlain herself, so that she was out of the reckoning also. Miss Colchester lived at the Durdens, a cosy yet commodious villa which had

Anne Chichester's Story

been built by her father, and boasted the best billiard room in Bridgeway, bar none. The Durdens stood quite outside the town, and for the last ten years, ever since old Mr Chichester was gathered to his fathers, Anne Chichester had ruled there as absolutely as a queen. In age Miss Chichester was just forty-two; in person she was tall and slight, a firm, resolute, cheery woman, with a mass of yellow-brown hair caught up in a careless knot on the crown of her head, and knowing neither the sear of hot irons nor the prisonment of curling-pins. She had clear grey eyes, a good complexion, and a pair of firm, capable, rather white hands. If she thought a person a fool, she did not hesitate to say so. She was charitable, energetic, kindly and definite, and in the world of Bridgeway she was a social power. Mrs Chamberlain, who was the great lady of Bridgeway, seemed to have no influence where Anne Chichester was concerned. It is quite true that she called her "Anne Chichester," and even that she held a certain place on account of it; but with Anne Chichester herself Mrs Chamberlain, in spite of her greatness, stepped warily and with much forethought.

One of the standing mysteries of Bridgeway was why Anne Chichester had never married. Once, and once only, was anybody found bold enough to put the question to Miss Chichester herself.

"Why don't I marry?" was that lady's brisk retort. "Why didn't I marry? Why haven't I married? Why, my dear, because I haven't!" And then she added, more briskly still, "Perhaps I will some day." But the years had come and gone until Anne Chichester was forty-two, and she was

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still Anne Chichester, and seemed likely to remain so.

Then a great social upheaval took place in Bridgeway, for the rector, Mr Stanniforth, was made Dean of Danforth, and for several weeks Bridgeway was very busy in collecting and choosing a parting gift for him.

Then came the news that a new rector had been appointed, the Reverend Algernon Marjoribanks. The news was first discussed at a large afternoon party given by Mrs Chamberlain.

"Who is he?" somebody asked.

"It's a good name," said Mrs Chamberlain.

"Oh, yes," exclaimed Mrs Betterton-Jones; "it's as good a name as Stanniforth."

"For the matter of that, I believe it's rather a better name than Stanniforth," said Anne Chichester.

"I have another piece of news for you," said Mrs Chamberlain, in her loftiest manner. "The new rector is forty-five, and a bachelor."

A sort of wave went round the room. The ladies, especially the unmarried ones, looked at one another, and one of them laughed. That was Anne Chichester.

"I think I shall give up the Durdens—let it furnished, or something—and go away," she said, rising from her chair and shaking out her garments. They were tailor-made garments of irreproachable build and delicate colour.

"But why, dear Miss Chichester?" asked Mrs Betterton-Jones.

"Well, for obvious reasons, dear woman," said Anne Chichester, smiling. "There will be such a

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flutter in the dovecots that—there! I needn't say any more. Good-bye, all of you. Good-bye, Mrs Chamberlain."

Mrs Chamberlain followed her to the door, then turned round, a stately and beneficent figure. "Mark my words," she said. "Before twelve months have gone by, we shall see Anne Chichester comfortably established in Bridgeway Rectory."

"We shall see what we shall see," said Mrs Betterton-Jones, with a knowing air.

Well, in due time the new rector came and took possession of his new living. He was a man of means and of considerable taste, and he provided for himself with a due eye to comfort and even elegance. His housekeeper was a motherly person, who wore black satin of an afternoon, and who issued her orders to the various tradespeople with an air of being at least a duchess. It was the habit of Bridgeway ladies, who all did their own shopping, to drop judicious questions here and there as they followed that domestic custom. The tradespeople of Bridgeway were all distinctly of a friendly turn of mind, respectfully chummy, so to speak; but no information was to be got anent the new rector. "Best of everything; pay every week," was all the information that leaked out in that direction.

The good people of Bridgeway were not very long in discovering that the Reverend Algernon Marjoribanks, although very desirable as a rector, and, for the matter of that, for a husband, had no intention whatever of marrying anyone in Bridgeway or out of it. He promptly put himself right on that point as soon as he had touch with his new parishioners, for

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he believed in the celibacy of the clergy, and was a little, spare, rather fussy man, a very High Churchman, and quite impervious to feminine charms. With Anne Chichester, however, he, in very early days, set up an intimate friendship, and so far as his attentions to her went, the idea that she would, a year hence, be safely ensconced as mistress of Bridgeway Rectory might have gained colour. But Anne Chichester's attitude was frankly commonplace.

"Don't you laugh at the new rector," she said one day, when several Bridgeway ladies were slyly chaffing her on the subject of the rector's frequent visits to the Durdens. "The rector's a nice little man, and much too good to be rector of Bridgeway. What you really want here is a man without a penny of private means, and a wife and ten children, which is what you'll get if you're not careful."

So the friendship between the two continued, but did not develop into the expected lines. And a few more weeks went by, until one dreary winter's afternoon, when Miss Chichester was sitting by her drawing-room fireside enjoying tea and hot buttered muffins, the rector was announced.

"Ah, is that you, rector?" she said. "You are just in time for tea and muffins. The muffins are unusually good to-day."

"Am I? That's good hearing." The rector believed in the celibacy of the clergy, but he also believed that the labourer was worthy of his hire in the matter of food. "I can't convince my old housekeeper," he remarked, as he helped himself to a second piece of muffin, "that afternoon tea is good for a man."

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"That's nonsense!" said Miss Chichester, holding out her hand for his cup.

"So I think. She always declares, however, that my lunch hasn't had time to digest, and it spoils my dinner."

Miss Chichester laughed. "All old people have their crotchets, rector," she said, pouring the cream into his cup with a liberal hand. "And, after all, if she does you well in other directions, afternoon tea is a small matter."

"Which is what I always think," said the rector. "By-the-bye, Miss Chichester, I want you to come and dine with me one day next week."

"Dine with you? Will the old lady approve?"

"Oh, she won't approve or disapprove. The fact is a man's coming to stay with me next week, and I'd like you to dine with me while he is here."

"Very well, rector, I'll come with pleasure. Going to have anybody else?"

"No—that is, Trevor Johnson, of course. Not — another lady, if that's what you mean. I—I thought you wouldn't mind."

"Oh, I don't mind. There's nobody in Bridgeway that I either care for sufficiently or fear sufficiently to spoil my dinner because they're not helping to eat it. Personally, I think Mr Trevor Johnson as nice a boy as one could wish to meet within a day's march. I only hope these silly Bridgeway women won't spoil him. I am afraid, by the way that I see him going around, that he isn't like you."

"As how?" said the rector, taking yet a third piece of muffin.

"I don't think he believes in the celibacy of the

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clergy," said Miss Chichester, with a twinkle in her eye.

"I daresay not. It's all a matter of personal conviction. I don't know that I should believe in the celibacy of the clergy if I wanted to get married. I don't. I never did but once, Miss Chichester—and she died. I never thought of any other woman, and I find celibacy a very convenient cloak sometimes to prevent questions and—er—plans being made for you—you understand?"

"I understand perfectly," said Miss Chichester.

He sat yet a little while longer.

"Shall we say Wednesday?" he asked, when he had actually risen to take leave. "Wednesday, at eight o'clock?"

"Yes, that'll do me," said Miss Chichester.

So on the following Wednesday at eight o'clock Miss Chichester was shown into the Rectory drawing-room. It was essentially a man's drawing-room arranged by an entirely middle-class housekeeper. Miss Chichester smiled as she looked round, thinking of the horrified faces of several Bridgeway ladies when they had learned that afternoon where she was dining that evening.

"Dear women, they are so funny!" her thoughts ran. "They think I can't go and eat a cut of mutton with the rector but I must needs get ideas of setting up housekeeping with him. How funny it is!"

Her thoughts were interrupted by the entrance of the rector himself. "I hope you won't mind," he said. "Dinner will be a quarter of an hour late. I've just had a line from Trevor Johnson. He's had to go and christen a sick baby."

Anne Chichester's Story

"I don't mind in the least," said Anne Chichester. "You never told me, by-the-bye, what the name of your friend was who was staying with you."

"Didn't I? Oh, how stupid of me! His name is Edward Carruthers, he's just come back from India."

For a moment the whole world seemed to spin round Anne Chichester. She put out her hand and caught hold of the chimney-piece that she might steady herself.

"What did you say he was called?" she asked.

"I said his name is Edward Carruthers. And here he is. Carruthers, let me introduce you to one of my most valued parishioners, Miss Chichester."

For the space of a few seconds there was dead silence. Then Colonel Carruthers made a step or two across the hearth towards Miss Chichester.

"Anne!" he said, and held out both his hands.

THE LITTLE BLUE BOWL

CHAPTER I

TWO lovers were parting. They had been lovers always. Ever since the Greencrofts had lived at Percy Villa, Tom Greencroft had been known to be the little sweetheart of Marjorie Dene, who lived with the rest of her family in the Charrington Road. The Greencrofts and the Denes might aptly have been described as being in Bridgeway, but not of Bridgeway. There is always in every semi-country place—I may say in every small place—a local set which is sandwiched in between the county, or what takes the place of the county, and that class of people who are sometimes sneeringly called “middle-class,” and who do not visit with persons of independent means, or those who follow professions rather than trade. And there is always another little set, which in the social sandwich may be likened to the butter which is sparingly spread upon the bit of bread which encases the savoury piece of meat in the middle. It is a set which is no set, which has few friends, lives a simple unostentatious life, and is not in Society or out of Society. And of this calibre were the Greencrofts and the Denes. They had no knowledge of the great

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Mrs Chamberlain ; they knew nothing of the feud, so strangely begun and ended, between that great lady and the Masters family at Deepdene. Mrs Stanniforth, the rector's wife, to them was only a gracious person whom they had met for a moment on one or two semi-public occasions—they were in Bridgeway, but not of Bridgeway ; I can express it no better.

Well, from the early days when Tom Greencroft had been Marjorie Dene's little toddling sweetheart, to the day on which they were parting, Tom and Marjorie had been lovers, through all the stages of sturdy schoolboy companionship, through the gawky period of early teens into the twenties, and now to a parting which might be for ever. They were not parting in anger, these two, no, no ! They had never loved each other so well as on that black and dreary evening when Tom arrived at the house in the Charrington Road to take his long farewell of the girl he loved.

It was very hard. They had never cared about money, these two. A pittance would have been sufficient for them so long as they had each other, but there are times in the lives of all men and women when the Hand of the Lord seems to come down upon them with such relentless force that no prospect of escape from black and bitter ruin seems to be open to them. So had the Hand of the Lord come down upon the once happy and prosperous family in Percy Villa. Death, desolation and ruin had combined to swamp the happiness of the house in a flood of tears. The once flourishing business, which had for two generations provided a sufficiency and something over for both the family and the offshoots, which had

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given billets to its sons, and provided modest little *dots* for its daughters, had, by reason of a diversion of the traffic in the far-away city, dwindled to a mere nothing. One or two sons had struggled into other things, the girls had gone out to fight the world single-handed, and yet there came a day when no longer could proceedings be staved off, which would end in the bankruptcy court. Then Tom's father, William Greencroft, threw up the sponge, and one sad evening a grave-faced official came down to Percy Villa to tell Mrs Greencroft that she was a widow, and that all that was left of her husband was lying in an empty room of the station three miles away. From that moment the downfall of the Greencrofts was inevitable and rapid. The creditors swept everything away. The boys and girls put aside what they could for the mother to live upon with the exception of Tom, who, having been with his father in the business, was as indigent as herself.

"I hate your going out to Australia," said Marjorie on that last evening.

"Yes, I know. But what can I do? I've got a chance out there. A man can live, so they tell me. Nobody will take me on in England at my age. They say I've been too much my own master. I have tried—I have tried for your sake. They all tell me the same. A man at five-and-twenty cannot bend his neck to the yoke, and I have been my own master in a sense."

"You haven't a feeling of that kind, Tom?"

"I? Not a bit. I'd sweep a crossing if I thought there was a real need for me to do it. After all, Marjorie, it's only for a time. I shall get on. I am

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young, I am strong, I've plenty of energy, I've got you to work for. It isn't as if you were like us, for instance ; you are solid, happy and comfortable ; and if you don't mind waiting a year or two longer . . ."

"I don't mind waiting," she broke in, "only as you mind waiting. You know that, Tom."

"Yes, yes, I know," he said.

And then they talked, fond and foolish talk, such as lovers always have between themselves. Then Tom Greencroft knew that the moment had come. He looked round the pretty cosy room. There was nothing very grand about it—a few nice engravings on the walls, a few dainty knick-knacks, cushions, trifles of lace and ribbon about the furniture, a little cabinet with some quaint Indian figures and a few bits of old china. There were two more figures and some bronzes upon the chimney shelf, presents from Mrs Dene's brother, who had been out in India for many years, and had sent little remembrances from time to time to his favourite sister. He knew them all ; he had known them all from his childhood, excepting such as had but recently come.

"You have got something new there, Marjorie," he said. In his supreme misery he could not think of the great event which was happening, only of trifles. "I have not noticed this little blue bowl before."

"Ah, Uncle Richard sent that last week to mother. I forgot to show it to you. It's nice ; he says it is a very good one and very old."

Tom Greencroft took up the little bowl and looked at it attentively. It was a curious bit of porcelain, blue and white outside, and within painted with a series of gaudy scenes.

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"I suppose it's Japanese," he said. And then he put it down with what was almost a cry. "Oh, I think that I am going out of my mind to give a thought to a thing like that when you and I are parting with each other. Oh, Marjorie, Marjorie, you'll not forget me?"

"Tom," she said firmly, "I shall never forget you."

CHAPTER II

TEN years had gone by before Tom Greencroft came home again. Poor Tom! He had gone away from Bridgeway with a breaking heart, out of a ruined and disappointed life into the new world full of hope and opportunity. He had found out, like many another has found before him, that the unknown is not always an improvement on the trodden paths. "Better the devil you do know than the devil you don't," had been a favourite saying of Tom's father, and many and many a time he had recalled the words with a grim smile of despair. Indeed, he had not known the particular devil to which he was bound when he had turned his back on his old life and set his face towards the new world. Opportunities seemed never to come in his path; the chance upon which he had gone out failed before he had set foot upon Australian shores. He had no special qualifications; nobody wanted him; there was no room for him. He had been through the same course that is trodden by so many of our young men who go out to the new world because there seems to be no room for them in the old. At first he had tried for some-

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thing suitable, then for something possible, then for anything that would keep body and soul together. He had been a waiter in a restaurant, a driver of a bullock team; he had done a turn at stock-rearing; he had tried a grocery store, a vegetable store; he had tried to get into the police; he had served on a cargo boat between Australia and New Zealand; he had done anything and everything, even a turn at begging now and again when utterly in need. Naturally his letters home had grown blacker and blacker in tone; he could not honestly hold out any hope to the girl so patiently waiting at the house in the Charrington Road.

So year after year went by, and at last he wrote to Marjorie that he was terribly uneasy about her. "I have never changed towards you," he said pathetically. "As long as I am alive you will be to me the fairest and most dear creature that lives, but I have no chance. I hear of poor mother's death by this mail, and now I know that I shall never rise, never be any better than I am, a waif and a stray, that your servant would hesitate to admit inside your doors. I hope my mind is not sunk lower than it was, but I bear upon me such marks of the toil and privation that has been my portion, that I feel I should be acting inhumanly towards you if I did not write now, while I have still strength to take the honest course, and tell you that I won't hold you to your promise any longer. It is not right that I should link my misfortunes to you; it is not right that my failure should embitter and impoverish your life. It is not true love to want to drag the woman that you would give the sun and moon and stars to,

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if you had them, into the gutter. So I give you up, my darling, and it is your true but heart-broken lover who writes to you for the last time."

A week after posting that letter to Marjorie Dene, Tom Greencroft received one from her. "Dearest," she wrote, "I have terrible news for you. On Sunday night father sat down on his chair by the fire, gave a gasp, and was gone before we could reach his side. I don't know what there will be for us to live upon. Mother is prostrate with grief, incapable of attending to any business, quite too ill to go to the funeral, which was yesterday. Everything has fallen upon me. You know, dear Tom, how few relations we ever had; we have nobody to help us now. You are too far away for me to consult; your people are all in trouble, and have burdens of their own, so whatever I do I must do myself, and trust that all may turn out for the best. One thing is certain—that there cannot be very much for mother to live upon."

"It was lucky that I set her free," said Tom Greencroft, with grim satisfaction, as he put the letter back in his pocket.

Then he sat down and wrote to her again, telling her that for the first time since he had last written to her he felt relieved and happy that he had taken the hideous deed upon himself, the hideous deed which would separate them for ever.

"I am too low down to do anything to help you," he wrote. "I am too low down to do anything now except love you. You can't live upon love; it isn't a marketable commodity; you don't want to be clogged by such a worthless wreck as I. I am as sorry for your mother's death as I was for my own—

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I love you more than ever—but I will cloud and ruin your life no longer. To-morrow I go up country. There is room there ; there is none down here in the towns.”

That was the last line that Marjorie Dene received from Tom Greencroft.

The years went by, and when ten had passed since their parting in the house in the Charrington Road, Tom Greencroft came back to his native land. Things had gone differently with him—not just at first, after he went up country desolate in the feeling that he had parted for ever from the girl he loved, but quite lately, when he had been one of the first to strike a new goldfield and had woke up one morning to find himself, not famous, but rich beyond the dreams of avarice. Then he had determined to realise and set his face towards home. These things are quickly done over in that new country on the other side of the world, and but a few weeks had gone by ere Tom Greencroft found himself once more in the great city from which he had last written to Marjorie. He had only a few hours to spare, and he looked about him with a curious sense of wonder. Now he was so rich ; then he had been so abjectly poverty-stricken. Why, there was actually the little coffee-house where he had taken his last meal. He went in for old associations' sake and ordered a cup of coffee, and then his eyes fell upon a row of dingy letters which had been years awaiting their owners.

“Anything for the name of Greencroft?” he asked.

Yes, there were three, three precious letters from Marjorie Dene ; the first declaring that she would

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never give him up, the second urging him to write to her, the third—oh, it cut him to the very heart's core to read it, for in the third she had somehow grasped at an idea and had taken it as the truth—that he wanted to get rid of her.

He thrust the letters into his pocket and swung out of the little shop, and all the way, as the good ship ploughed the waves on her homeward journey, he would touch those letters and think of them and smile, for he was going home rich, and he would make it all up, yes, if he should find her.

Then he went down to Bridgeway. It was as a city of the dead. There was not a face he knew, not a soul that remembered him, no one who knew anything about Marjorie Dene.

Yes, at last there was one bright little woman in the baker's shop at the corner who remembered her. She remembered him also.

"Ah, your poor mother died just about the same time as poor Mr Dene was took," she remarked when he had revealed himself to her. "Poor Mr Dene, it was soon over with him!"

"What got Mrs Dene and her daughter?" asked Tom.

"Ah, that's more than I can tell you. The young lady, she come in here to say good-bye to me, and she was looking very sad. They went somewhere up in London. I did hear afterwards—yes, I did hear tell that she was going into business of some kind. Now what was it? It was an outlandish name—something to do with curiosities."

Business to do with curiosities! He went out of the shop with a kindly word of thanks, and wondered

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how he should light upon Marjorie Dene, who was somewhere in wide London in a business connected with curiosities.

He went straight off to the post-office and asked for a look at the general directory. No clue there. Then he went up to London and into every district; where there was a guide to be bought, he bought a guide and searched for the name of Dene, who had something to do with curiosities. Oh, the pilgrimages, the journeys, the searchings! And they were of no avail.

"I shall have to advertise in the papers," his thoughts ran. So he advertised, but he might as well have advertised for one who had been dead three hundred years.

At last he heard of a Mrs Dene living in a street of small houses in a western district. No, it was another dead end, another lane that had no turning, so with apologies he turned his footsteps away and set his face towards the main road. And then, as he passed down an unconsidered little street, he saw a small shop with a few pictures, a few plates, some quaint old jewellery, a sampler or two, and a little blue china bowl in its window.

"Where have I seen that bowl before?" he said to himself. He stood and looked at it, looked over the door—there was no name—looked at the bowl again.

"I seem to know it. It's like the face of a friend. Did we have a bowl like that at home? What is there about it? It's a quaint-looking little thing. I'll go in and buy it."

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He went in, the shop bell ringing with a shrill summons.

“You have a little bowl in the window,” he began—then there was a pause, an ejaculation, and a cry of—“Oh, Marjorie!”

HER OF THE OPALS

I had a thoroughly old-fashioned bringing up, and it was a circumstance upon which my mother particularly prided herself. She had a horror of emancipated women, and everything that she did was actuated by the conventionalities, or what she called "the proper thing."

Looking back now, not so long ago, for I am still a long way from thirty, a kind of dull shame creeps over me to think that she, who should have been my best friend and guide, should have turned me out into the world with so poor a panoply with which to make my stand against all the injustice and unfairness that assail us poor women during the course of our earthly pilgrimage.

But, you see, my mother was one of those semi-saintly, wholly-worldly characters who are ladies first and mothers afterwards, and she would infinitely sooner have died than have done anything by which she would have got herself talked about.

"My dear," she said to me one day, "it is no use to kick against the pricks—we have the highest authority for it. We must accept our fate and make the best of it. It is the fate of women who have been born in a good position in Society to have

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certain restrictions laid upon them, and from these they can never get away—unless, indeed, they choose to break out and put themselves beyond the pale, when, poor things, they soon find out that the game isn't worth the candle, and spend the rest of their lives in a vain repining and a longing to get once more into safe shelter. Yes, I know it is a nuisance that you should have to take a maid with you when you want to go out without me, but there, what would you have? You are not a little *bourgeoise* whom nobody will notice—you are Miss Dampier of Drum."

Many and many a time did I wish that I had not been born Miss Dampier of Drum. I would ever so much rather have been Miss Smith of Brixton—it would have been far better fun. However, Miss Dampier of Drum I was and, until I should be married, Miss Dampier of Drum I must of necessity remain. Therefore I had to put up with the restrictions which my position necessitated. And, mind you, there was no mistake about our position. The Dampiers had been Dampiers of Drum ever since Norman William came over and reapportioned out most of the lands in this country. We went to the State balls, and to the Marlborough House garden-parties; and people intrigued to get invitations to my mother's entertainments as sedulously as if it would constitute the *entrée* to the courts of heaven. I really had a very gay life, and was exceedingly happy at home; indeed, had it not been for the feeling of chokiness which from time to time came over me, I should never have had a thought of discontent from my cradle to my marriage. For my mother was extremely fond of me and very proud of my beauty,

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and still more proud of my accomplishments, which were many.

"Yes, I daresay you might have gone on the operatic stage, darling," she said to me one day, when I had spoken of my yearning to step out of the ordinary grooves a little, "under other circumstances, that is. But what a mercy it is that you have no necessity to do anything of the kind. I always think much publicity spoils a woman so, and takes away all her womanly charm. Look at Lady Peplum, for instance. I daresay she does do a great deal of good, for she has closed all the public-houses on her estate, and any of her labourers who are caught indulging in a glass of beer to their dinner are discharged at once. All the same, I must say I do think it a little interfering with the liberty of the subject, and only think how much more popular she would be, with her great wealth, if she were like an ordinary landowner."

"But using a great gift like the voice is different to the kind of work Lady Peplum does," I replied.

"Yes, dear," mother said gently, "but what would you gain? These poor creatures who sing in opera—very beautiful and enchanting some of them are, I admit—only sing to attract *us*. When they get to the very top of the tree, they sing to people in good Society. You sing to no others—what more can you want? I am sure, dear Phyllis, I never raised the very smallest objection to your singing at the Duchess's concert on the 17th."

"Yes, and they will applaud because the Duchess will pat her hands together; and perhaps the Princess will send for me to pay me a little compliment," I

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returned. "That's not like having the wild enthusiasm of a great audience."

"Mostly middle-class people," returned my mother, with an air of fine disdain.

I sighed. It was so useless to try to make her understand. So I sighed.

"I always think," my mother went on in her sweet Society voice, "that there is so much truth in what dear Longfellow says,—

" ' It is the fate of a woman,
Long to be patient and silent, to wait like a ghost that is
speechless.' "

It comes in *The Courtship of Miles Standish*. Still, I don't like the character of Priscilla at all. She might have been a Puritan, but she must have been an exceedingly forward young person. And worse than that, she was so very blind to her own best interests. To refuse the great soldier, quite the best match in the place, for a mere clerk—*most* foolish."

"But if she liked the clerk best—" I began.

"Girls should like best what is best for them," returned my mother, quite severely.

I sighed again. I felt a thrill of sympathy with Priscilla.

But when I married nobody had anything in the least little bit disagreeable to say about it. For I became engaged at the end of my first season to the most eligible man in our set. Lord Uppingham was, I should say, more courted than any man in London. He was very rich, very handsome; he could make his wife a Marchioness; he had the finest rubies in the world. And he proposed to me.

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For six weeks I was the most-talked-of young woman in England. If I went for a walk, the fact was duly chronicled in one or other of the papers. My gowns, my jewels, my looks, my voice and my wit served to fill up many and many a paragraph, and if people did not go to the length of standing on chairs to look at me, they went almost as far, and I was always conscious of nudges, twitchings, nods and little headshakes whenever I went abroad, all those small signs by which people try to convey silently to their companions when anyone of out-of-the-common interest is nigh.

And in due time we were married. There were columns and columns in all the papers about the ceremony and the wedding presents, about my frocks and the presents that Lord Uppingham gave me. There was an unusually fashionable mob to see the knot tied, and Royalty shed its smiles over both ceremony and reception. I was sickeningly happy. I asked my husband the same question about fifty—or was it a hundred and fifty—times during the first week of our marriage, "Uppingham, do you think you will always love me as you do now?"

His answer at first was invariably the same, "A thousand times more." And then I was obliged to give vent to a great sigh of unutterable, blessed, blissful, deep content.

And afterwards? Well, when a week or two had gone by and we had moved on from our first domicile, and I was still anxious to hear from my husband's lips the assurance that—great and wonderful thing—he still loved me and would always love me, his reply began to change. Instead of saying

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"A thousand times more," he would say, "Darling—darling!" and having kissed me a great many times, would promptly change the subject. But I was deliriously happy.

After a time, we slipped into something of what our future life was to be. You see, we were married in the middle of July, and when we had stayed for ten days at one of our country houses, we went for a little cruise in the yacht, just a trip along the French coast and past Rotterdam and Scheveningen as far as Copenhagen. Then Uppingham wanted to run over to Paris for a few days and, though the weather was very hot, I preferred to go too, for I hated the very idea of being parted from him, even for a few days. After that we had to go and show ourselves to our people at Uppingham Castle, and then we went up to Scotland, where we gave our first house-party.

So the autumn went by and winter came on. We went to Town early, as Uppingham was wanted on various important political matters, and if he was anything he was loyal to the interests of his party—I need hardly say that he was a rigid Conservative.

I had never liked London so little. I saw only about half as much of Uppingham as I had done at any time since our marriage. My dresses and jewels were as much noticed as ever, and we were overwhelmed with engagements, but I hated them because they all served to separate me from him. It came on gradually, you know. For instance, one day an invitation came for a dinner at the Duchess of Belgrave's.

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"We shall go to that, of course," I said to my husband.

"What is the date?" he asked. "Oh, the 17th of next month! What a pity, I cannot possibly go."

"Why not?" I cried, and I daresay my voice showed how great was my disappointment.

Uppingham looked up. "Because it's the same night as the Jim-Jam dinner."

"But why do you accept Jim-Jam dinners?" I cried. "You know I can never go to them."

"But you can go to the Duchess's," he returned soothingly.

"Can't you throw over the Jim-Jam thing?" I asked desperately.

"I am presiding," was his reply; and he spoke in a tone which did not admit of any further argument.

I felt—well, as if my heart had suddenly been gripped hard in a vice. I wanted to say that if he loved me as I did him he would never make a positive engagement without at least consulting me; but somehow the words stuck in my throat, and it was all that I could do to keep the blinding tears out of my eyes, or from breaking down utterly before him. As it was, I did manage to get away to my own rooms and to keep my outburst to myself.

So a couple of years went by. Excepting that no child had come to carry on the old name, there was probably not a woman in the kingdom who had the reputation of being as truly happy and fortunate as myself. My mother used to sing little very well-bred pæans of joy whenever we met, which was pretty often, as we were in the same set and knew just the same people.

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"I never see you, dear Phyllis," she said one day to me, when we were driving home together from a morning concert at which we had both been obliged to show ourselves, "without rejoicing over your perfectly ideal marriage. When I see some marriages, and think of dear Uppingham's devotion to you, I do feel so utterly thankful that you are so happy."

"Oh, yes, dear mother," I replied, "I am quite happy, and Uppingham is the best husband in all the world."

But it was a lie for all that. I was not quite happy, and though Uppingham *was* a most indulgent husband, and never interfered with me or asked me a single question as to the way in which I spent my allowance, yet I had slowly but surely come to realise, though the idea had never once been put into words, that what was sauce for the goose was most emphatically not sauce for the gander, and that while I must always defer my plans and life to him, he did not feel himself in any sense under obligation to do the same with me. And this was before I came to the knowledge that I was not supreme in my husband's life, or sole mistress of his heart. Pure chance brought me that information.

I happened one day to go to a certain well-known jeweller's and to see on the counter a sketch of an ornament. It was for a monogram some three inches long, forming the top of a chatelaine, and a small watch hung below. Underneath the sketch, in my husband's handwriting, was written: "Carry out design in diamonds and opals. Monogram to be repeated on back of watch. To be ready *without fail* on the 16th of June."

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I took all this in in the twinkling of an eye, and moved away to another part of the shop before the person in attendance returned. I saw that he whipped the paper up as if it had been a mistake to leave it there, and that he put it away carefully in a drawer. I kept my nerve well enough, and arranged an alteration in one of my own necklaces, sauntering back to my carriage with a self-possession which I felt was admirable. And once in the carriage, I gave orders to go to the Park, and told them to go right round, for I wanted to have a quiet think over the knowledge which had just come to me. It came home to me then that, during the last three or four months, I had seen very much less of my husband than I had before realised. Looking back, I was appalled to remember how little he had been with me. We had dined out together on very important occasions, and he had dined at home on the evenings when we were entertaining. Otherwise, we had lived much apart, and the days had been filled up I could not say how. For one thing, he had taken ardently to fishing, and was sharing a fishing lodge with another man. That, of course, had prevented my ever going down for a few days with him, as, of course, Lady Uppingham was much too important a person to think of roughing it in bachelor quarters.

I did not see a soul whom I knew in the Park that day. I sat quite still, while my people drove me round and round, turning my head neither to right nor left, my brain filled with that horrible, overwhelming, stunning sense of having come to the end of everything.

So I was already wearied of—I, the bride of a

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season but two years gone by; I, who had been talked of, written of, *flattered*, flattered, envied—oh, my God! the mockery of it all! The mockery of it. And this creature liked opals—I had always hated them. Her initials were R. E. Yes, those were the letters entwined into the elaborate monogram which formed the top of the costly toy, and they were to be repeated on the watch which would depend from it. R. E.—they seemed to have burned themselves into my brain, and to be ringing in and out, to and fro, like nonsense in the over-wrought mind of a delirious patient. I don't know that I should have minded the existence of this creature so much if it had only been a question of money, but that my husband should be troubling himself to think out personal gifts for such an one—oh, *that* was where the sting came in. Undoubtedly a cheque for a thousand pounds would not have hurt as that sketch, with its supplementary directions, had power to do—and *did*.

The footman turned round at last and asked how long I would remain in the Park, or if I wished to go home? I said "Home" because my raging mind had no thought for itself just then. And as we went, I found myself conning over the past again, thinking how he had behaved to me, trying to find the joints in his harness, to discover some fatal flaw in him. And yet I was fain to confess that from first to last he had treated me with the greatest indulgence and even affection. In fact, in all our married life, Uppingham had never once spoken a cross word to me, never once. And yet I could see so plainly now that we were living two lives; that there were many hours in which I was less than nothing to him—I,

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who had once hoped that I was all the world to him, as he was to me.

He drove up to the door in a cab just as the carriage stopped. I had barely time to pull myself together ere he came to help me out.

"What is the matter?" he asked. "Don't you feel well? You're as white as a sheet."

"Only a headache," I murmured vaguely.

He followed me into the house, and went up the great stairs beside me.

"Do you think you can get through the dinner to-night?" he asked anxiously. We were dining at the Russian Embassy.

"Oh, yes, I will go and rest for half an hour," I replied.

He followed me into my dressing-room and pulled a chair up to the window for me.

"I would advise you to have a glass of champagne, Phyl," he said, taking my hand and holding it in his warm clasp. "You are over-done. Have you been to half a dozen stuffy parties?"

"Not to one," I replied. "I've been driving in the Park for—for hours, I think."

He rang for some champagne, and I drank what he gave me. But though it got into my head and made my eyes brighter, my heart ached just as badly as ever.

My women came presently and dressed me, and put on jewels and flowers as they pleased. Then they wrapped sweet-scented laces about my shoulders, and drew my gloves on over my nerveless hands, and having armed me with a fan, sent me forth, the most docile mistress whom they had as yet ever known.

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Once or twice I caught them looking significantly at one another, as if to ask silently what was wrong, but though I saw, I could not release myself from that terrible iciness which had gradually overspread me.

As the brougham moved away from the door, my husband took hold of my hand: "Well, little woman, feeling better?" he asked gaily.

I looked at him blindly. "I am not very well," I said, like a child that has learned a lesson and is not, as yet, familiar with it.

"My dear," he exclaimed, in a tone of alarm, "I'm afraid you're going to be ill. You ought not to have come to-night, though, of course, no one likes to break a dinner engagement."

I shall never quite know how I got through that evening. I believe nothing out of the common happened, and probably the man who took me in to dinner thought I was next door to an idiot; and so, to all practical intents and purposes, I was.

But the next day, after an entirely sleepless night, I could bear the suspense and pain no longer, and I sent for Uppingham, asking him to come to my dressing-room. He came at once, bringing a newspaper in his hand, and asking with much concern if I was better.

"I am not very well," I said, "but that is not why I wanted you. I—I—wanted—I wanted—"

He looked surprised, and laughed. "What! Is it debt? My dear child, you should know by this time that you have only to tell me anything you want."

"Is that *quite* true?" I said, with an effort. I was trembling so violently that I could not keep my

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hands still, and I thrust them under the loose hanging sleeves of my morning-gown so as to hide them from him.

"Why, Phyl, my dear, you are trembling!" he exclaimed. And then he sat down beside me and put his arm around me. "One might think that you were afraid of me," he went on, teasingly. "Come, how much is it?"

"It is nothing of that kind," I said, trying hard to steady my voice. "I want to ask a favour of you."

"And it is—?"

"I want you—I want you—to promise to spend the whole of the 16th of next month with me."

He took his arm away and got up instantly. "The 16th of next month? Why, what on earth have you in your mind?"

"Oh, it is only a fancy of mine," I answered lamely. I felt that my explanation was as lame as lame could be. I felt, too, that I had flushed a vivid, guilty, burning, shamed scarlet under his keen and scrutinising gaze.

His reply came with such a surprise to me that I almost fainted from the revulsion of feeling. "Of course I will spend the whole of the 16th with you," he said quietly. "I did not know that you cared for my exclusive society—you have become such a fashionable woman, that I always feel I must not obtrude myself upon you too much."

"Oh, Uppingham!" I exclaimed reproachfully.

"Could we not—?" he began, then broke off short and looked at me in an embarrassed kind of way.

Seeing that he stopped, I put an eager question to him. "Uppingham, do take me down to the Castle

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for a few days—without anyone with us. Just you and I together.”

“To be sure. When shall we go?”

“On the 16th.”

“No, not on the 16th,” he said. “I have an engagement for the next day which I must keep.”

“What engagement?” I asked, all my suspicions rising up again.

“An engagement,” he said quietly.

And then I lost my temper and my discretion, and flashed out, “With *that* creature, I suppose.”

He dropped my hand, which he had been holding, and looked at me stonily. “What do you mean by that?” he asked in a voice of ice.

“Oh, Uppingham,” I cried, “what is the use of trying to humbug me? I know all about it. That R. E.—I suppose you are going to keep her birthday, or something. Who is she? What is she to you?”

He looked furiously at me. “So you have been spying upon me,” he said disdainfully. “I suppose it is only what I might have expected from a woman.”

“You have no right to have engagements and friends of whom I know nothing,” I cried passionately. “By every right in the world I ought to know all your life. I am your wife—I have been a good wife to you—I have always thought of you first and foremost, and ~~this~~ this is all the reward I get. Oh, Uppingham, it is cruel of you—*cruel*.”

“If you have quite done—” he began in a bored tone, when I interrupted him quickly.

“No, I have not done, not by any means. I am young, and women don’t have justice in this country—you know that as well as I do, and you presume

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upon it—but I am not going to sit down quietly and put up with the existence of such a creature as this. You gave me this,” I went on, holding out my hand, on which there blazed a great emerald engraved with the motto of his house—*Nil nisi verum* ; “it was one of the first things you gave me, Uppingham. And I took it—as an emblem of the future. ‘Nothing if not the truth.’ I, too, will be nothing if not the truth to you. I will be all or nothing.”

He turned back again. “My dear Phyl, does that mean that you are going to make a great *esclandre*, that you are going to blazon the story of your fancied wrongs to the whole world? You have found out that I have a friend whom I don’t ask you to receive socially.”

“And that you order valuable personal ornaments for her, opals and diamonds,” I broke in indignantly.

“Surely a small matter that,” he said, with a sneer. “Have I kept you so short of such things that you need grudge a mere trifle for a lady to whom I am under obligations? If that is all I am quite willing to get you a new diamond tiara to-morrow.”

“I’m not jealous of a few jewels,” I returned, suddenly growing calm. “If I am jealous, it is for your honour and for my own. It is not to my honour that I should share my husband with—with—a person he does not, cannot ask to my house. As to living a lie, and making believe to the world that everything is right between us, why should I do it? What have I to gain by it?”

My husband, who was leaning against the mantelshelf as coolly as if we had merely been discussing the state of the weather, shrugged his shoulders.

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"That is a question entirely for you to decide," he said indifferently; "but I must remind you that you cannot get a divorce from me. I have never ill-used you, and I have no intention of deserting you. You might be able to get a separation, it is true, but what would you gain? You will make it exceedingly uncomfortable for all our friends, and your position would be shorn of all its glories. Your mother would be the first to say that it is best to bear anything rather than to make an *esclandre*. Ask her—put a parallel case to her—see what she says on the subject."

I shuddered. I knew exactly what my mother would say. I had no need to ask.

"For myself, I am very sorry that you have found out anything about this matter. I was, and am perfectly satisfied with you as my wife. I am exceedingly fond of you still. I had thought our *ménage* so admirably arranged, so different to the fuss and worry of some other households we know. Now it is all changed, and unless you are very much more sensible than you seem inclined to be at present, only a cold neutrality is possible between us. I would have given a great deal if this had never happened."

"Uppingham," I said, rising and going close to him, "you know that I love you; you know that I love you with all my heart. If you will give this creature up, if you will promise me never to see her again, I will never, on my word of honour, allude to this affair again. I will bury it as if it had never been."

"I cannot do that," he said.

"Why can you not?" I cried imploringly, for my love was all up in arms, and pride, though I was Marchioness of Uppingham, and had been born a

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Dampier of Drum, was nowhere. "Uppingham, my dear, come back to me. What is it that I lack? Tell me, is there any one respect in which I have failed you?"

I put my arms up about his neck, but he held himself back a little, just enough to break my heart. "You ask too much," he said.

"You won't give her up for me?" I urged.

"I will not give her up for anybody," he replied. "I cannot—this has been going on longer than you think. There is a reason why I cannot give her up—in one sense she has a prior claim to you, although you are my wife."

"What claim?" I cried.

"You have no child," he said, under his breath.

So *that* was where I had failed, that was where this other had the advantage over me. I sat down, and for a minute or two there was dead silence between us. Then I looked up at him again.

"Uppingham," I said, in a dull, hard tone, which did not sound in the least like my voice, "you are quite right. It is a subject which will not admit of any argument, and we will say no more about it. I will make no *esclandre*, and I will keep my position—not as your wife, but as Marchioness of Uppingham as long as I live. Henceforth you are free from any duty to me excepting so far as may be necessary to blind the world to the true position of affairs between us. That is all I have to say."

"I think you are perfectly wise," he said, "and let me say, Phyl, that I am very sorry this has happened." And then he quietly took my hand, raised it to his lips, and left me.

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I sat there for a long time. My mind would not think connectedly, but strange scraps of ideas kept flitting in and out of my brain. So it was all over—all over; and Uppingham, whom I loved with the love of my life, would never be anything again to me as long as we might live. I wondered, in a dazed kind of way, what there could be about the other woman to have put me so completely in the background. Was it beauty? Well, I was lovely enough. Was it wit? The world called me witty. Was it love for him? Surely, surely, she did not, *could* not love him better than I had done. And as for that other claim—oh, my God, he would have to know sooner or later that I—I—had a claim too, a claim that had come too late, a link that was broken before it was born, a pledge of a worn-out affection, of a love that had wearied. Oh, God! oh, God!

And there was no redress, no hope of setting such a tangle straight. How should I bear it? How should I live through it—the shame, the humiliation, the degradation of bringing forth a child whose father had grown tired of me? If he had consented to give up her of the opals, I should have told him—oh, how joyfully—the great secret, the knowledge of which had just come into my life; as it was, I felt no ~~more~~ joy, only a great burning sense of utter shame and agony, and I prayed with all my soul that my unborn child might die before it was born.

AN OLD PASTE CROSS

CHAPTER I

MY mother wanted me to marry Colonel Darnley.

"Not Colonel Darnley," I said ; "no, mother, not Colonel Darnley."

"But why? Where will you find a man more everything that a girl would naturally desire. He is young—"

"Colonel Darnley young, mother?" I broke in.

"Well, dear, he is not a boy, but he is a man in the very prime of life—a little over forty, I think, but he may be less—which, being backed up by looks, position, wealth, charm—"

"Yes, dear, I know, I know," I cried.

I knew that I should have hard work to resist my mother. She was so persuasive somehow.

"It isn't every girl in your position, Evelyn," said my mother, "who has the chance of marrying a man who has been in the Guards."

"No, dear, I admit the chance—oh, yes, I quite admit the chance—and I ought to be over head and ears in love with Colonel Darnley ; I can't think why I'm not, but I'm not, and there it is."

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"My dear little girl," said my mother, with an air of indulgent patience in bearing with me, "don't you think that a great deal is talked about love that never enters into our daily life?"

"You married for love yourself," I said.

"Yes, dear, I did. And I repented it."

"Oh, mother!"

"Not as regards your father. He was everything that was charming, but he had no money; and when you come, as I did, to have a little child, you can't live upon charm. Your poor father was charming to the end, and here am I living on two hundred a year when I might have had the income of two hundred thousand. Oh, Evelyn, if I hadn't been so foolish when I was your age, things might have been very different for you. It's because I have been through it all, because I know what the struggle is, because I know the real value of charm, that I want you to start your life in a different way to the way in which I started mine. And so, my darling, I want you to marry Colonel Darnley, even if you don't feel that your inner being—that is to say your heart—is what we call madly in love with him. When a man is handsome, and well-born, and kind, and wealthy, he very soon teaches a girl to love him."

"I don't want to be taught to love. I—I couldn't consent to be taught to love, mother. Colonel Darnley is very fine and large, and—oh, so swagger; so swagger that he makes me nervous. And he has a great many very grand relations, I know, but I don't yearn to become one of them, I really couldn't become one of them. You mustn't ask me that. It's the one thing in the world, darling, I can't do to

An Old Paste Cross

oblige you. After all, we have two hundred a year—it's enough for us—and now I'm getting to make my own blouses—”

“Oh, my child, my child!” my mother cried. “How shall I make you understand?”

“You never will, darling, so I think you had better give it up.”

“But, dear—”

“Yes, I know, I know. I admit your wisdom, I admit all the cleverness of your arguments, and the sound common sense of them; but a girl who has possibilities doesn't want to marry for sound common sense, darling; she wants to marry for that something else that you had.”

“And suffered for,” she put in.

“Well, if I have got to suffer for it, then I'll suffer for it, mother; and I'll never throw it at you—no, I'll always own up, straight and honest, that you did your best, dear, to make me worldly, to make me prudent, to make me everything but what I am—a stupid, little foolish thing that wants to be married for love and for nothing else.”

“But you have seen nobody,” cried my mother.

“No, dear, I haven't see anybody; not a soul. I am as heart-whole a girl as there is in the whole of Northtowers to-day. That's the pity of it.”

“That's why Colonel Darnley wants you so.”

“Well, as I said before, Colonel Darnley is very fine and large, but he can't have everything he wants. Oh, these rich people, these rich men! They think they've only to hold up just the suspicion of a wedding ring to pick any girl they like out of the marriage basket. But not this one, not this one!

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Evelyn Dalgarno has got her price. But it isn't a price of so many thousands a year, of so many diamonds, and so many fine clothes. I've no doubt he'll marry much better; he'll marry a duke's daughter in the end, and I daresay he'll be very much happier with her than ever he would have been with me, because she'll be of his own set, not like me—a poor little pariah and outcast. Don't ask me again, dearest. Let us make up our minds to make ourselves happy on our two hundred a year."

"No, you make me very unhappy," said my mother.

"No, darling, I don't, I don't. After all, if I reject wealth for poverty, it's my lookout, isn't it? It is I who will suffer, it is I who will go in poor raiment for the rest of my life, it is I who will have to grub about in a little shabby house and do my own poor little marketing, and perhaps cook my own poor little dinner. Don't fret yourself, dearest."

"I can't help fretting myself," said my mother, with the saddest of sad expressions. "If I could have seen you Mrs Darnley of Darnley Court, I could have died happy."

"But, darling, you are not at all likely to die. There's nothing the matter with you. You are just thirty-nine. You have excellent health, and you have a settled income which nobody can take away from you. Oh, don't think of dying or anything like that while we have each other and enough to live upon. If it comes to that, why don't you marry Colonel Darnley yourself?"

"Colonel Darnley doesn't want to marry me," said my mother.

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I couldn't deny that; there was reason in what she said; but in truth I did think that of the pair of us my mother would be the most suitable to become Colonel Darnley's wife.

But woman proposes and man disposes of himself, and when Colonel Darnley spoke to me about what he was pleased to call my "rejection," I hadn't courage enough to hint that my mother was a much more charming character than I.

"I am sorry you won't have me," he said, the next time that he found himself alone with me.

"Oh, don't put it in that way, Colonel Darnley," I cried.

"Well, however I put it, the fact remains the same," he said gravely. "I think I could have made you happy. Women like me as a rule, and although I have had my incidents in life, I never wanted to marry a woman before."

You don't know how odd it felt to be called a "woman" by such a very important man as Colonel Darnley. I looked up at him—and it was a long way to look—and then I looked down at my feet.

"Colonel Darnley," I said, "I suppose I must own up to the truth, that I am a miserable little ingrate. I ought to be like all the other women and—and like you. I do like you, but I don't love you, and I am certain I never should. I don't suppose, when I do love somebody, that he'll be half as good as you are, but I have always felt the same—that whatever I missed, or whatever I suffered, I would never marry, excepting somebody that I was madly in love with."

"And there is nobody?" said he, looking away from me into the fire.

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"No," I said, "I have not seen the man yet that I would want to marry."

"You haven't?" He was looking back at me with a wild light shining in his eyes, that were, as a rule, coldly blue. "Then, Evelyn, there is still a chance for me?"

"Oh, no, don't say that. I shall never alter in that respect. Forget me—don't think about me any more."

He seized my hand almost roughly. "You might as well tell the Falls of Niagara not to tumble downwards," he said vehemently. "I would forget you fast enough if I could, but I can't—I can't."

CHAPTER II

THAT happened in the spring of the year, when the wind was still in the east, and fires still burned briskly in the grates.

A week later Colonel Darnley came in one afternoon and said he was going to London the next day.

"For long?" asked my mother.

"Oh, I suppose till the end of the season or thereabouts. Then I don't know that I sha'n't go to Norway. I've had an invitation to join a friend of mine who's going off there at the end of July."

"And you'll be away how long?" asked my mother.

"A couple of months. And then I shall have shooting, and then hunting. I think I may as well go. I've never fished in Norway, and I'm a little tired of going to Ireland. By-the-bye, Evelyn," he

An Old Paste Cross

said, turning to me, "I shall be away at the time of your birthday. I've brought you an old paste cross of my mother's. It isn't a thing of very great value, you needn't mind taking it; but it belonged to her and I should like it to belong to you."

"It's awfully sweet and kind of you. I—I—don't deserve it," I said. I was so embarrassed that I put my finger in my mouth like a great schoolgirl.

My mother murmured something about having forgotten an important message, and made a sheer bolt out of the room. I suppose my embarrassment must have gone straight to his heart, for he took hold of my hand and held it as one's brother might have done.

"You needn't look so frightened," he said, "I wasn't going to begin it all over again. I've planned my life always on one motto—'Never make yourself cheap.' I shall never ask you to marry me again unless—well, unless you should give me hope. So make your mind quite easy. And you'll take this cross and you'll wear it, won't you? I've brought it just as my mother used to wear it, with the chain and everything. You needn't open it till I'm gone."

"But you're awfully kind. I don't like taking it—under the circumstances," I said.

"Oh, as to that, we'll not go into that question. There's just one thing that I want to say to you; if at any time you should change your mind, you can send me a word or a wire and say—'Come back.'"

"I'm afraid I sha'n't change my mind," I said, feeling oh, so ungrateful and everything that was horrid.

"No? Well, if I were twenty-eight instead of thirty-eight I suppose I should stop here and plague

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the life out of you, and get my own way in the end ; but I am thirty-eight years old, Evelyn, and by the time he's thirty-eight a man has learned to sit tight."

So he was only eight-and-thirty instead of being considerably over forty. And I was just twenty years old. I don't know that there was so much difference between us.

I told my mother afterwards that she needn't have hurried out of the room, that Colonel Darnley hadn't in any sense made love to me, or wanted to do so. And then we opened the box containing the cross, and I put it on my neck and looked at myself in the glass and sighed. It was a sigh of much contentment. He said it was of no particular value; it looked as if it was worth a great deal of money. It was heavily set in silver, was Maltese in form, and was attached to a chain of small pearls. I thought it was awfully sweet of him to give it to me, and I loved to have it, "but I shall never change my mind," I said to my mother.

Well, the weeks and the months went by. We went back to our little social round, very tame, very dull, very unexciting; to going to service at the Cathedral, to fetching a new book from the circulating library, to trotting in and out of little At Homes at which never a man showed himself; to planning out new blouses, and faking up old hats, and trying to make sixpence do the work of a shilling. Oh, how dull it all was!

I'll do my mother the justice to say that she never reproached me—never once. She never said when I was tired to death with the dreary, trivial, simple round, that it was my own fault that I, too, was

An Old Paste Cross

not fishing in Norway. I don't know that I wanted to fish in Norway, but what I did want was someone to love, and someone to love me.

And at last he came. Oh, he was glorious! He wasn't distinguished, like Colonel Darnley—not at all. His name was Bright, Mr Eustace Bright. His people lived in London. He had come to be articulated to a big firm of solicitors in Northtowers; he was indeed second or third cousin to one of the partners of the firm, and as soon as he saw me he went for me.

Did he make love to me? Oh, didn't he! Did I fall in love with him? Oh, didn't I! Was I happy? Oh, happiness was no word for my condition! It was ecstasy, it was delirium. I trod upon air. I had found my king—my god among men.

My mother was very nice to him. She made him free of the house. She was very kind to him in rather a distant, stand-off fashion. She said he was a nice-looking boy, and that by-and-by he would tone down into quite a nice person. And I couldn't say anything, I couldn't stand up for him. I could do nothing but shut my teeth hard and bite down all the love and championship that was raging in me.

I left off wearing my old paste cross. I said—it wasn't quite true, and looking back I feel very much ashamed of myself—I said that I was sure the string on which the pearls were set was not quite safe. My mother remarked that I had better take it round to the principal jewellers and get it restrung. But I didn't. I put it away in its case,

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and I locked the case away in a drawer; and then I felt myself quite free to worship Eustace Bright.

It was the beginning of October before Colonel Darnley came back again. He came and called upon mother, but I was out. If the truth be told, I had gone to afternoon service at the Cathedral, with the expectation that, at the conclusion of the service, I should find Eustace Bright waiting for me at the corner of the screen. Colonel Darnley had only come home for a few days. He was going a round of visits for shooting, and my mother told me that he was more than half inclined to give up his hunting this winter and go further afield in search of bigger game.

And then a few more weeks went by, and one afternoon, when Eustace and I were sitting in one of the outer courts of the Cathedral, tucked up against a great salamander stove, so that we could see those who passed up and down the aisle and nobody could see us, he told me something. Told me that he loved me; broke it gently to me that though he loved me, he didn't love me quite enough.

I think I behaved beautifully. "Eustace," I said, "I have been an awful fool I don't know what madness has possessed me these last few weeks. I—I have deceived you utterly—and myself. I let you think that I was heart-whole, fancy free, that I was a little blossom ready for you to gather. I must have been mad. My dear boy, I have been in love with another man for years. I don't think I ever realised it until this minute."

"Another man?" he said jealously, while a dark

An Old Paste Cross

frown overspread his face. "What sort of a man?"

I laughed. "What sort of a man? What shall I tell you? You will see one day. He is a man who is much too good for me. I shall tell him everything—everything: every word that I have ever said to you, every time that you have ever kissed me. Perhaps he won't have me now, but I shall tell him honestly, squarely, everything; and if he won't have me—well, then I'll never marry anybody else. I'll go down to the grave proud that he once loved me and wanted me for his wife."

I went away then. I went back to our little house a new girl, and going upstairs and unlocking my drawer, got out the old paste cross, and I kissed it and put it on. And then I knelt down in the cold, by the light of one candle, and I wrote a letter. I said: "Come back. I want you.—EVELYN."

Then I went out again into the dark and chill winter evening. I walked quickly to the post-office, and going in, bought a penny stamp, and just as I was pressing my finger on it to make it secure, a voice behind me said,—

"You needn't post that. I'll take it myself."

He broke it open there and then, while I stood rooted to the spot.

"Let us go home," he said.

We walked down the busy street, and turned up a side road that was the nearest way home.

"That isn't quite all," I said; "that isn't everything."

"Isn't it?"

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"No. I have been mad, I have been wicked; I don't deserve that you should ever look at me or think of me again. I must have been mad; and I only came to my senses half an hour ago."

Then I told him everything; what I had said to Eustace Bright, all that had occurred between us; how after the talk in the Cathedral I had gone home and taken out my cross and put it on again. And then I waited for the verdict.

And the verdict was "Not guilty!"

YOURS FAITHFULLY

LETTER I

From JOHN ST JOHN, 29th Dragoons, Cavalry
Barracks, Blankhampton, *to* Miss VIVIENNE
CAREW, The White House, Hockington, near
Blankhampton.

Tuesday, Jan. 3rd.

MY OWN DARLING,—How absolutely delicious it is to be able to write to you like this! Think, only yesterday morning you were Miss Vivienne Carew, a goddess as far above me as the skies are above the heavens. To-night—for I am writing just as I have got back to my quarters from the ball, so that you can have my letter to-morrow morning with your breakfast—to-night you are all mine, my own, mine for ever and always. It seems almost too good to be true. Dear little girl, do you really mean it? Yes, of course you do. What a brute I am to doubt you! Not that I really doubt, because, somehow, from the first moment that I saw your blue, blue eyes, looking at me in that dim religious light in the choir of the old parish church, I knew somehow that you and I belonged to each other.

I ought to have tumbled into my cot and gone to

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sleep the moment my head touched the pillow. I don't think I shall sleep for nights and nights. I'm sitting now in my big chair, pipe in my mouth, writing-pad on my knee, just thinking about you, just full of you, just like a man possessed. Can it really be true?

Oh, little girl, little girl, I'm no sort of match for you. I've lived a clean, straight, honest, wholesome life ever since I had a life; I'm not in debt, I haven't got a black mark of any sort against my name; and yet I feel such a clod beside you. If only I were very rich, if only I could buy all the jewels in the world to lay at your dear little feet. But there I can't. I've got eleven hundred a year and my pay, and that's all, little girl. I think I'd like you to know it before I go to your father. But what I want you to know most of all is that you have made me the happiest man on the face of the earth this night, and I am, for ever and always, your devoted slave,

JOHN ST JOHN.

LETTER II

From Miss VIVIENNE CAREW, The White House,
Hockington, *to* JOHN ST JOHN, Cavalry
Barracks, Blankhampton.

I GOT your letter with my tea in the morning. I slept rather late, or else I should have had it by what is commonly called the eleven-o'clock post. Somehow it seemed to reproach me. You went home and sat down and thought about me, and wrote a letter to let me know that you really were thinking about

Yours Faithfully

me all the time. I went home and kissed my programme just where you wrote your name, and then I got into bed, and I knew nothing more until my tea came at eleven o'clock. I hope this won't disillusionise you; I hope you won't feel that you have thrown yourself away upon a girl without a soul. I don't know that I've got such, but I've got a heart somewhere knocking about. I rather fancy it's to be found in the quarters of Lieutenant John St John, Blankhampton Barracks.

I am so glad you asked me to marry you last night. I am so glad I said yes. Girls are such fools, you know. I might have said anything if I had been in that mood. As it was, I said what I meant—a great, big, simple yes. And I mean to stick to it.

As to your not having much money, what does that matter? I haven't got any money; I haven't a penny but my dress allowance, and that is only just as much as will cover my needs. I have got prospects; by-and-by there will be some family money coming along, and I don't suppose my old dad will let me come to you quite empty-handed. Anyway, supposing we haven't a farthing but your eleven hundred a year and your pay—which I suppose is about twopence a day—we'll manage on it somehow. We might go to India, or I might take a charwoman's place. Dear, to be quite serious, I would rather scrub floors for you than I'd wear somebody else's rubies and diamonds. I can't say anything prettier than that, can I?

You can come down about four o'clock this afternoon. I'm going to send this up by one of the men, so that you'll get it quite early. It's now nearly

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lunch time ; you ought to get it while you are eating yours. If you come down about four o'clock I doubt it there will be anybody here but myself, and I shall be what I began to be last night—Your own

VIVIENNE.

LETTER III

From JOHN ST JOHN, 119 Duke Street, St James's, to
Miss VIVIENNE CAREW, The White House,
Hockington.

Feb. 8th.

A WHOLE beastly week since I saw you! Oh, my own, I don't see how I am going to get off going to India, and I don't see how I am going to persuade your father to let you come with me. Still less do I see how I am going to live for two or three, or even four years without you. Would you like me to chuck up the Army and go down to the Rowans and live on my eleven hundred a year? It would be like burying you, and yet what heaven it would be if you would only do it.

I went to the War Office yesterday, and cooled my heels about endless secretaries' rooms—at least I suppose they were secretaries. They were all men in swagger frock coats, with gardenias in their button-holes, and they all had Piccadilly accents, and they all smoothed their heads in exactly the same way, and they all said, "Aw, I don't exactly know when the Chief will be able to see you." I was there for hours, and when at last I was so hungry I could scarcely hold myself up I did get sight of the Chief.

Yours Faithfully

He said, "Don't want to go to India? Nonsense! Can't entertain it for a moment. Next, please!" I suppose I must get somebody of influence to say a word for me. The question is who? The Colonel won't; none of my people will. They think I ought to go to India; it will be good for me. I'll see if I can't get hold of Billy Lessingham. He was in our regiment before he went into the Guards, and got chosen as head cook and bottle-washer to a certain exalted personage. He might do something for me. Happy thought! I'll go and see him to-morrow morning if I can get hold of him!

Darling, after I had cooled my heels until I was perfectly sick for want of my lunch, I arrived at my club, and by dint of a little palm grease I succeeded in getting a very belated lunch, just in time for afternoon tea. As I had had no breakfast, you may imagine I wanted it. Then I sauntered up St James's Street as far as Bond Street, and I bought you a turquoise buckle. You said the other day you'd rather like one. I hope you'll like this. It hasn't as many diamonds mixed with the turquoise as it would have had if I had had eleven thousand a year instead of eleven hundred, but I hope you will wear it in remembrance of your own boy, who exists, and always will exist, for you and in you, and will never this side of the grave have thought for anybody else.—From

JOHN ST JOHN.

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LETTER IV

From Miss VIVIENNE CAREW, The White House,
Hockington, *to* JOHN ST JOHN, 119 Duke
Street, St James's.

Feb. 9th.

I HASTEN to answer your letter at once, dear old Jack. I have an awful feeling that something is going to happen to us. I never had anything of the kind come over me before. This has got absolute possession of me. It began a day or so after you left. I didn't tell you in my earlier letters, because I wasn't sure that I was right, and I hate talking about mere impressions.

Last Tuesday father received a letter which came whilst we were at breakfast. He frowned over it a good deal, and h'med and hawed a little; but then he often does that with a letter, and I didn't take very much notice. That night at dinner he said he thought we were living a bit too high. Now all the years that I can remember I never knew father to say anything about living too high before. Since I have been engaged to you, I consider that, on the contrary, I have been living distinctly at less cost than I did at least four years before. I said to father, "I really don't understand what you mean, dear." He muttered something about sweetbreads—we had sweetbreads. He said it was an expensive time of the year for them. I said I would speak to the cook; but that we were always accustomed to have them from time to time, and I did not know that the time of the year would make much

Yours Faithfully

difference; anyway, sweetbreads for two couldn't ruin anyone. I didn't understand this, but the thought has occurred to me that perhaps father has lost money. If so, you must be prepared for the worst.

I'm having an awfully dull time. Margaret Graves came over yesterday morning in her cart, and told me that there was a rumour going round that I was going to marry Sir John Pilkington. I told her that it was absolutely absurd, that I was engaged to you, and that I hadn't the slightest intention of marrying Sir John Pilkington, or anybody in the world but you. She said, "Well, coming events cast their shadows before." I said, "Are you mad?" And she said, "No, I don't think so." And then I took her to see a new frock that I have got, and after that she asked me if I'd give her a few cut-flowers, as one of their under-gardeners had not left the hothouse open from which she generally cut her flowers, and they hadn't enough. I gave her a basketful, and she drove away. After she had gone it occurred to me that what she had said was rather remarkable. I haven't arrived at any solution of the mystery, and so I hand it on to you for what it is worth. I marry Sir John Pilkington! Did you ever see him? He's quite old—my dear, he's sedate; he's as old as father. He's quite strait-laced and proper, what they call old-fashioned in his manners, full of an old-world courtesy. He looks as if he'd like to kiss the hem of your garment, and would be frightened if you offered him your lips. Sir John Pilkington and I! It's awfully funny, particularly after you. Don't worry about this. It will be an awful bore if I've got to

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wait three or four or five years until my gay knight comes back from all the errant damsels of India ; but still, if it has to be, it will have to be, and it's no use fretting about it. If you do go away, I shall, as it were, lay myself up in lavender until you come back. I shall allow no emotion, I shall put myself to no strain, I shall live by line and rule, so that you will find the most perfectly preserved sweetheart on your return.

I haven't got the turquoise buckle yet, darling. Why did you waste money over one that had diamonds in it? I would have liked a silver buckle, or a paste one if it came from you. I don't pretend I don't like you to give me little presents. I do, I love them ; but diamonds cost a lot of money, and we shall want all ours, sha'n't we?

Now, and always and ever, your own

VIVIENNE.

LETTER V

From JOHN ST JOHN, 119 Duke Street, St James's,
to Miss VIVIENNE CAREW, The White House,
Hockington.

Feb. 19th.

MY OWN DARLING,—It's quite hopeless. I'm coming home to-morrow. All my time in London has been wasted. My quest is hopeless. I've got to go to India.

All else will keep until we meet, which please arrange for Thursday, four o'clock.—Yours aye,

JOHN ST JOHN.

Yours Faithfully

LETTER VI

From JOHN ST JOHN on march. Address next to Pangsal, Blankshire. *To* Miss VIVIENNE CAREW, The White House, Hockington.

March 19th.

DARLING,—I can't believe that it is really all over, that I've turned my back upon Blankhampton for ever; that until I shall be lucky enough to come back with our wedding-day fixed I shall probably not see you again, unless you can persuade your father to come down for a couple of days and see us go. The other fellows were very merciful to me. After we passed your house they didn't chaff me as is their wont. They let me ride on by myself, and I rode hour after hour, pulling hard at my pipe, and, if I own the truth, trying to keep the tears out of my eyes. You know those terrible turns in life when you feel everything is over. It's wicked of me to feel it. I know that everything isn't over; I know that you will be true whatever happens. I know that I shall die yours and yours only; and yet one epoch has come to an end—the blessed one of seeing you every day, of being part of your daily life, and you being the only part worth living in mine.

Your father was most curious when I said good-bye to him at the gate. He said, "Well, good-bye, St John. Think as kindly of me as you can." I don't understand in the least what he meant. Why shouldn't I think kindly of him? He is your father. I have every reason to think there's not another man

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in the world like him. He said it in such a singular tone. "Think as kindly of me as you can!" Do you think there's anything in the wind? Do you think they're just waiting until I get away, or—oh it's preposterous! I'm awfully tired. First day of march is always so exhausting, and I've got to go all round the billets and inspect everything.

I enclose the complete route. Write to me every day if you want me to keep my reason. I don't think you quite realise what it all means to me. It always seems to me—I hate to say it, and yet I think it, I feel it—it always seems to me as if I loved you so much more than you could ever condescend to care for me.

I oughtn't to have said that. I'm getting drivelling. It's the first day of being absolutely parted from you. Forgive me. I'll try and be more cheerful to-morrow.

Now, for ever, and always yours,

JOHN ST JOHN.

LETTER VII

From Miss VIVIENNE CAREW, The White House,
Hockington, *to* JOHN ST JOHN, 29th Dragoons.
To wait arrival at Bombay, India.

MY DEAR ONE,—It seems to me as if Fate has been pursuing us ever since we met. How is one to break bad news? Shall I break it to you, or shall I plump it out straight? I think I had better take the plunge, and get it over.

Dear Jack, it's no use you and I thinking of each

Yours Faithfully

other any more. Father came to my room last night when everybody had gone to bed. I didn't tell you in my last that we had quite a houseful of people coming for the races. I hate the races; I hate the fuss and worry and bother. I've hated it this year worse than any year that has gone before.

What did you say to me the first time you ever saw me? "Miss Carew, what blue eyes you have!" And that night you asked me to be yours, you said to me, "I have never seen a girl with such blue eyes as yours." Well, my dear, you'll never see my blue eyes any more. I don't think they are blue now. I think they've washed out into a sort of dingy grey. I feel they'll never be blue again. I feel the skies will never be blue, and the flowers will never be bright, and life is all over and ended. I've got to bring our story to a close.

I've read the words I have just written. They look brutal. They look as if they were written in letters of blood upon a human heart. They look brutal, and hard, and cold. They seem the very quintessence of desolation.

Do you realise what it is I am saying to you? We have got to part—you and I. I don't know why. I can't think why. I've got to marry Sir John Pilkington, not because I care for money, not because I want to flaunt in the Pilkington diamonds; I shall never wear them; not because I want big houses and fine carriages and high-stepping horses. I don't care for any of these things. But something has happened, something that's nothing to do with me; something I can't even tell you about. The only way to put it straight—oh, if I put it brutally, the

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only way to shut it off, and stop it all from coming to light, is for me to marry Sir John Pilkington. Think of it! Think what it means to me! Think what it will cost you. I think I have the worst of it. You will be away, Jack; you'll have your sport, your life, your freedom. You can go and marry another woman if you want to. *I'm going into penal servitude for life for the crime that I did not commit.*

Is it any good saying any more? I needn't protest to you what I feel; I needn't tell you I'm sorry. Such words are inadequate between you and me. I've got to do it. There's no shirking, no getting over it, or under it, or round it. I've got to go right through.

I won't ask you to think of me; I won't ask you even to pity me. I'll only end it all now, and say that I am, as I shall be as long as I have a breath left in my body, yours,
VIVIENNE.

LETTER VIII

From JOHN ST JOHN, 29th Dragoons, Raalkôte, India, *to* DAVID CAREW, Esq., The White House, Hockington.

June 1st.

DEAR MR CAREW,—I have received a letter to-day from Vivienne definitely breaking her engagement with me.

From the contents of that letter I can only conclude that she is acting in such a way as to shield you from the consequence of some definite act of yours. I write immediately to warn you that I shall

Yours Faithfully

not sit down silently under this treatment. Your daughter is definitely engaged to me, with your full approval and consent. There has never been a shadow of wrong between us. I have, I consider, sufficient means for her to have married me had it not been for your extraordinarily strong wish expressed against it. I only desire to remain in India until I get my troop. I would gladly have brought Vivienne with me, where she would have had just as much comfort as my wife on my income and pay as she would as your daughter at home. If you marry her to Sir John Pilkington I shall immediately bring an action against you. I shall produce in court the letter I received from her this morning, and I shall employ the finest counsel and detectives in England to find out exactly the why and wherefore of her extraordinary determination to bring our engagement to an end. I'll leave no stone unturned to expose the exact truth.

I am not writing this in a passion, but in cold blood. I have all my life had the most pronounced opinions on the subject of the sanctity of marriage, which it seems to me you are violating at the present moment. That you can seriously contemplate—putting me entirely out of the question—a girl like Vivienne being given to the arms of a man of Sir John Pilkington's age and previous experience—I say nothing against his character—seems to me as incredible as it is monstrous.

I have the honour to be, yours faithfully,
JOHN ST JOHN.

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LETTER IX

From Miss VIVIENNE CAREW, Bridgewater Manor House, near Chertsey, to JOHN ST JOHN, 29th Dragoons, Raalkôte, India.

June 30th.

DEAREST,—The most extraordinary things have happened since I wrote you last. I don't know what I said, I was almost out of my mind. I'm almost out of my mind now, but in a different way.

Just a week ago father told me that I had better come down and stay for a short time with Aunt Mildred — Lady Mannington, you know, who was my mother's sister, is a wealthy widow, and lives here. He said I was to stay with her until I heard further from him.

Yesterday I received an extraordinary letter. It was from father, saying that he had been thinking very much during the past few days about my intending marriage. He saw that I was unhappy. He felt that the price was too much for me to pay, particularly where there was a straight and good man in the background whom I was so anxious to marry, and that he had written to Sir John Pilkington definitely breaking off my engagement. He adds that it will be necessary for him to leave home, as things at the bank have gone very queer, and that I had better remain with Aunt Mildred until I hear from you.

All this is inexplicable and extraordinary. I haven't heard a word from Sir John Pilkington. Father says he is sending all my things from home,

Yours Faithfully

including the things that belonged to my mother. He himself has already left, and he doesn't say where he is going ! But I suppose he will be all right. He is so accustomed to look after himself. As for you, Jack, I hope I am not doing wrong in taking it for granted that you will be only too glad to come to me, or send for me, or something, so as to give me a shelter. Shall I come out to you ? Would one of your married ladies receive me ? Or will you come home and fetch me ? Or how will you manage it ? You might send me a cable and let me know.

I feel, somehow, that my father's letter was very sad ; and yet it seemed like the letter of a man who had got a great weight off his mind. I couldn't make it out ; and Aunt Mildred, who is very dear and sweet, says she thinks I'd better follow out exactly what he says, as I might worry him if I did anything off my own. So I am writing to you at once, darling, and you must please let me know, with as little delay as you can, so that I may shape my course accordingly.

This morning I have been round this enormous house, and I have looked at myself in every looking-glass that it contains, and at every looking-glass I have uttered a prayer of thankfulness that I haven't got to marry Sir John Pilkington. Even if I had never seen you, Jack, I think I should have felt just the same. He is so old, so cut-and-dried, so punctilious, so old-fashioned, and somehow so polished and hard. I did hear a rumour not many days ago that his first wife pined away and died. If I had been his second wife I should have pined away

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and died too ; only I believe I should have given Sir John a very bad time while I was doing it.

I won't write any more rubbish, but just put, as I always put, that I am, your own

VIVIENNE.

CABLEGRAM

From JOHN ST JOHN, 29th Dragoons, Raalkôte,
India, *to* Miss VIVIENNE CAREW, Bridgewater
Manor House, near Chertsey.

"COMING home."

AN EMU'S EGG

"SURELY we might sell something," said a fresh young voice. A pair of turquoise blue eyes looked round the long, old-fashioned room, looked round with that far-off gaze of despair which only comes to the very young. "Surely," she repeated, "we might sell something."

"What?" said another voice.

"I don't know what," said the girl, impatiently. "That is a thing to decide, not to declare offhand—*something*, I said."

"Oh, something is anything. There's your great-grandmother's open-work sugar basin—"

"Oh, not that!"

"No? Worth a lot of money."

The speaker was a young man, dark, resolute, long of limb, straight in the shoulder, flat in the back, clear of eye, radiant in health.

"Not my grandmother's open-work sugar basin," the girl repeated, half appealingly.

"Well, then, there's the old blue Worcester."

"Oh, Jack, not the old blue Worcester—scale blue! It's worth a fortune."

"And we want a fortune."

"Ye-es. But think, if the tide turns just when we've sold our most precious belongings. Oh, I should never get over it if we had to part with the old blue Worcester!"

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"Well, what else is there? There's that old Chippendale sideboard."

The girl turned and looked at the sideboard doubtfully. "The sideboard?" she repeated. "When I was little, Jack, we always used to say it was a hideous old thing, and we longed to have a beautiful mahogany one, all scrolls and cupboards and things, and massive. It would have cost five-and-thirty guineas at least, and, somehow, the old Chip had to do us until we grew up. I should hate to part with it, Jack. I know it's worth money now, but don't let's part with the old Chip."

The young husband caught hold of the young wife's hand. "Dear," he said, "you and I have got ourselves into a tight corner. If we can put on the time for a few months, we shall be all right; it's only a question of tiding over. We're not well known enough to get into debt—people don't trust one in London—but surely we might find something that we can turn a little money on."

She looked round the room again. "I don't know what, Jack. The silver is all what Martha calls 'fastened'; no pawnbroker would lend anything on china or old Chippendale furniture."

"No, I don't suppose that he would. That's why I thought that we might sell something, just to keep us going until better times come."

"Well, I'm quite willing to sell," said the girl. "After all, what are such things? You love them and cherish them, and then you go away and leave them, just as mother did. She loved all her old things. She used to love that old Venetian mirror, with all the little cut-glass drops hanging to it; I've

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seen her spend a morning cleaning it—she never let any hands but her own touch it. But mother went away and left them all. I suppose she has better Venetian mirrors where she is."

"I suppose you wouldn't like to sell those?"

"The Venetian mirrors? Oh, Jack, they were mother's. She brought them with her when she married dad. I couldn't sell the Venetian mirrors, dear."

"There's only one thing," he suggested, rather diffidently.

"Yes?"

"Well, there's just one thing—"

"Yes, Jack?"

"I don't like to suggest it to you," he went on.

"Well, what is it?"

"That set of Chelsea figures," he said. "They're real—gold anchor—literally worth their weight in gold. We should get a hundred to a hundred and fifty pounds for them."

"The Chelsea figures? Jack, anything but the Chelsea figures?"

"Yes, my dear, that's what you say about everything."

"Do I? Not quite."

For the first time a shade of impatience crossed the young man's face. "My dear girl," he said, "why suggest selling anything? You love your things; we must hang on to them at any price. Of course, if the worst happens, and Boggles should insist upon his bill being paid, we shall lose everything; all your precious possessions will be scattered to the four winds of heaven. It's a question of

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parting with one to keep all. We must keep on for three months, until that arrangement is made, and the money comes in. We haven't got credit; we haven't got anything."

"Well, Jack," and there was a sound almost of tears in the girlish voice, "I daresay you will think it's very silly of me to want to cling to the things that I knew and loved when I was a child, that were associated with all my girlhood and my old home, but I do feel it. I—I don't think I should mind parting with the old prints, that set on the staircase. I always heard they were worth heaps of money; father used to say they were worth twenty guineas each. Of course, I don't like parting with them, it's no use pretending I do; it's just like tearing up my heart by the roots."

"Oh, don't say any more about it. We'll get on somehow."

"You're vexed, Jack," she said.

"No, I am not vexed. It goes to my heart to ask you to give up anything that you have been used to—anything that you care for; all the same, it seems to me when the child may be wanting for food, and we've only to keep on for three months—because you know, we shall be all right as soon as Blossom & Co. pay that cheque—it does seem rather—well, just a bit selfish, Maud."

"Is it selfish? Am I selfish?" The turquoise eyes looked at him with deepest reproach. Selfish! No such word had ever passed between them in the eighteen long and happy months of their married life. They were both so young, this boy and girl; they knew nothing of the stress and storm of life,

An Emu's Egg

They had never been rich, but they had never been really poor until now ; and now the cruse had failed, and there was a long gap of three months, a yawning black abyss of necessity which must be bridged over somehow—anyhow. "Selfish !" she repeated.

"Well, I think it is rather selfish."

A torrent of words gushed up to the girl's lips. She was on the point of saying, "Take everything ! Don't use such a word as that to me, don't think such a thing of me ! What are a few pots, a couple of Venetian mirrors, even an open-work silver sugar basin with a blue glass lining, what are they compared to the love of husband and wife ?" All this rushed into the girl's mind and trembled upon her lips, and then a bright thought struck her.

"Jack," she said, "I have an idea ! We want something to pay the butcher's bill first and foremost. Poor old Boggles, he's been very good to us ! We ought to make an effort to pay him, oughtn't we ?"

"Yes, of course we ought."

"Well, I'll tell you what we'll do, dear. We'll sell your emu's egg—it's worth five pounds at least—and we'll pay Boggles." She made the announcement in a tone of triumph. "Then you shall take the old prints," she went on. "You'll make a lot of money on them. Until you can realise them, the emu's egg will just tide the time over."

"The emu's egg ? Oh, I never thought of selling the emu's egg"

"Didn't you, darling ? Oh, but surely you have no associations connected with it ? Somebody you didn't care for gave it to you—at least, so you have

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always told me. You can't afford to have it mounted in a silver cup; it would cost twenty guineas, and it wouldn't be very pretty. We haven't exactly a front parlour, that we can stick it in a big wine-glass and place between the curtains on the top of the family Bible. And surely, Jack, you wouldn't be so *selfish* as to keep your emu's egg to yourself when my scale blue is hanging in the balance? Oh, Jack Cholmondeley, I think I'm ashamed of you!"

"Dearest," said Jack, "I don't think I realised until this minute how much you felt about your pots and your silver. I'll tell you what we'll do—we'll hang on a bit. I'll see if I can't borrow a couple of fivers. I don't like to think of you parting with your pretty things. You value them. Don't be downhearted, little woman, it will all dry straight. Something's sure to turn up. Who is the fellow in Dickens that said so?"

"Micawber, of course."

"Well, I never thought I should get to feel like Micawber. But he was a wise old chap, and Dickens knew what he was doing when he drew the character."

If Jack Cholmondeley's young wife didn't agree with her husband, she hid the fact remarkably well. Not one word further did she say on the subject of her precious scale blue Worcester, or the bill of Mr Boggles, the butcher, and the tiny household seemed to go on as if it had had a fresh start. But not for long. In the most modest household the sum of money which is airily called a "couple of fivers" doesn't last very long; and after a little time,

An Emu's Egg

although Mr Boggles still supplied the little flat with meat, there were other gentlemen in the provision line who became very uneasy as to the safety of their money. One supplied bread and another green-groceries, and yet a third dealt in "sugar and spice, and all that's nice"; and then there was a lady who, if not fair, was certainly of a ruddy countenance, and she represented that soap and starch and fire and labour could not be bought for nothing. Dear, dear, they were evil days for those two very young people, and the one of them looked at the scale blue Worcester and thought it was a pity so much money should lie idle, and the other wistfully regarded the emu's egg and could not imagine why Jack clung to it so much. "He found it so easy to part with *my* things," her thoughts ran one day, when she was wondering which of the various possessions would have to go. "He thought me quite selfish because I wanted to hang on the scale blue and the old side-board; but that emu's egg — Oh, Jack," she broke off as her husband came into the room, "dear old boy, it's no use beating about the bush, something will have to go. Shall it be mine or thine?"

Well, eventually they decided that now there was but a little time to get over before the welcome cheque from Blossom & Co. would arrive upon the scene, and he magnanimously suggested that she valued the old prints the least of anything she possessed, and that they might as well raise money on them first.

"What about the emu's egg?" she cried.

"The emu's egg? Well, look here, old lady, I

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don't mind sacrificing the emu's egg if you don't mind sacrificing the prints."

And so the precious emu's egg was taken from its place by the scale blue Worcester in the little cabinet, and, carefully wrapped in tissue paper, made a journey to the shop of a vendor of old curiosities in a big street leading out of the Haymarket. Now, you know, it's a very different thing selling to buying. When selling is the habit of certain people, then, doubtless, it is easy enough to sell, but when the lifelong habits of even young couples have been always in the direction of buying and never in the direction of selling, then the first break-up, even of unimportant treasures, is a very serious and weighty matter.

He set, off, this Jack, valiantly enough; arrived in the Haymarket, looked at one or two of the more important shops, as he put it in his own thoughts "funked it," and then crept round to a little shabby, unconsidered shop, full of dingy pots and dirty brasses behind uncleaned windows, in a back street which might almost be called a purlieu. He walked along boldly enough, thrust open the door of the shop, started at the fierce clamour of the bell which woke the echoes overhead, and—and—and—said, "Oh, morning! I particularly want to match an emu's egg. Have you such a thing in your collection?"

"Emu's eggs?" said the rather dingy young man who came out in answer to the bell. "Ah, that's them green ones. Yes, I think we've got several, sir."

"Ah, thanks."

An Emu's Egg

"He hadn't long to wait. In an incredibly short space of time the young man came back with a small wooden box, in which a couple of emu's eggs reposed in a wisp of aged and dingy newspaper.

"I have others if these don't exactly match, sir," he remarked cheerfully, picking out one and holding it up so that Jack Cholmondeley could get a good view of it. "I suppose you're going to make a pair of cups of them?"

"Something of the kind," said Jack. "What's the price of that one? It seems to me a very good match for mine."

It was a good match, excepting that the one egg was dirty and the other was clean. The young man remarked on it.

"And the price?" said Jack.

"The price? Oh, I'd let you have it for two shillings."

"Two shillings? Well, come, that won't break anybody. I thought they were much more expensive than that."

"No, sir. You see they're fancy things. It isn't many people as cares about them. If it was a great auk's egg now, it would be another matter."

"Yes, I suppose so."

And then Jack Cholmondeley felt in his pocket and brought forth two shillings, which he could ill afford.

If he felt, as he put it, "in a bit of a funk," when he went down that shabby purlieu of the Haymarket and into that dingy little shop, he felt very much more inclined to take to his heels and run away

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when he put the latch-key into his own front door and confronted his wife.

"Well," she said, "did it come off? How much did you get?"

"Don't worry me, there's a good girl. I—I didn't get anything."

"What?"

"I don't quite know how it happened," he said, "but they're worth nothing. I've bought another one."

"You've bought another one! And they're worth nothing! Oh, Jack!"

"It's only two shillings, dearest," he said, penitently. "And I was so taken aback, I couldn't get out of buying it."

"Oh, Jack!" she exclaimed, "I don't believe you really tried to sell it."

"I did—honour bright, truth, and all the rest of it I did. I'll never go to sell anything again, Maud—never, never as long as I live. I wasn't cut out for that sort of thing. I felt such a fool—I've got myself landed with this thing—I—"

"Poor old Jack! Well, dear, I was so determined that you shouldn't have all the generosity on your side, that I sent for an old Jew that Mary knew of. He came—he paid me compliments, Jack! Said I was a dear little thing," she went on, her eyes dancing with laughter; "that he was 'real' sorry I had had to part with my pretty sideboard; and then, Jack, he asked me if I had ever found out that there was a secret drawer in it, and I said no, I had never looked. And he showed me the trick, and—oh, Jack!" she cried, flinging her arms round him, "you don't know

An Emu's Egg

what a dear my old friend is. He opened it, Jack, and there was treasure-trove in it; diamonds, pearls—a little off colour, but he says it will all come back again—emeralds—treasure—and—and—he called me 'my tear' again, and I gave him a drink and one of your uncle's cigars, Jack! Oh, darling, darling, darling! it all came of the emu's egg!"

AUNT MATILDA

CHAPTER I

"THE least that you can do," said Mrs Vansittart in disgusted tones, as she turned from the fireplate, "the smallest return that you can make for the love and care which I have lavished upon you, is to try and take some of the burden of Aunt Matilda off my hands."

"I tell you Aunt Matilda cannot bear me," said a girl's voice, indignantly. "I will do anything else. Send away one of the servants and I will do the work cheerfully, willingly, without murmur; but force myself upon Aunt Matilda when she positively cannot bear to see me anywhere within a mile of her"—the fresh young voice died away in a choking sob.

Mrs Vansittart put the poker back into its place with what was almost a crash. "Joyce," she said in a still more severe tone, with a face set like stone, "I had almost said that I am surprised at you, but I suppose that at my time of day I ought to know better than to be surprised at any mark of ingratitude that I may happen to meet with."

"I am not ungrateful, Aunt Emelia," Joyce Harcourt burst out.

Aunt Matilda

"You may not choose to call it by that name, but at the same time your gratitude to me for having stood between you and the world, for having taken you in when your poor father left you adrift and penniless and shared the home of my daughters with you, should make you accede to my requests without murmur and do unhesitatingly such services as lie to your hand. I wish no preposterous sacrifice such as taking the place of a servant, or that you, my niece, should do housemaid's work. I ask you a simple thing. Aunt Matilda is old and, I admit, crotchety. She is dependent upon me for all the companionship and comfort of her life. Of course I know that Aunt Matilda is well off, and it is my duty as her favourite niece to carry out her lightest wishes. She writes to me now, 'I am not feeling well, send me one of your girls to keep me company for a few days.' Well, how am I placed? Rosamond's *fiancé* arrives to-night on a week's visit. Can she spend part of that week at the beck and call of a tiresome old lady like Aunt Matilda, who, if she knew that Rosamond was dying to be away, would take a delight in thwarting her at every turn? Kathleen is not well. You know quite as well as I do that Kathleen was knocked up last time she went to Aunt Matilda, and she has never recovered since, and the chill she caught the other day has weakened her considerably. Under these circumstances, I cannot understand, Joyce, how you can hesitate for one moment to oblige me."

"Oh, Aunt Emelia," said Joyce, "you surely don't think that I would hesitate in obliging you; it is

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only that Aunt Matilda hates me so, I seem to rouse all the devil in Aunt Matilda."

"Joyce, I am surprised at your saying such a thing in my presence," said Mrs Vansittart, with a great assumption of dignity.

"Of course, Aunt Emelia, I beg your pardon for saying the 'devil,'" she added, choking a little more, "and of course if you think she will put up with me, I will very cheerfully go and do my best. Of course I don't mind being called names all day long, it's not that; and I don't mind her telling me that I am a clumsy clown, and that I shall never get married because I am such an idiot. It is not that, Aunt Emelia, in the least, but only that she told me the last time I went there that if you ever sent me to her again she would cut you off with a shilling; indeed, she did!"

The distressed tones, and still more distressed voice, mollified Mrs Vansittart a little, and, being really a very kind-hearted woman, she had already begun to repent of having, so to speak, thrown her charity in her niece's face. "Very well," she said, in distinctly mollified tones, "I will drive over and explain exactly how it is. Really, I cannot understand why it is that the old lady should have taken such a dislike to you as she has: I don't find you any more stupid than any other girl. After all, I shall tell her she cannot expect to find old heads on young shoulders, and you will do your best, my dear. Remember, Aunt Matilda is extremely well off, and if you do anything to offend her, she will go and leave everything she has to those detestable Gledderburns. I am sure the last time I met Mary Ann

Aunt Matilda

Gledderburn, she gushed about 'darling old Aunt Matilda,' until she made me feel perfectly sick. But anyway, certain it is that neither of the girls can possibly go, and really, if she cannot put up with you, I don't know what I can do for her."

"I will do my best, Aunt Emelia," said Joyce, eagerly; "but I know—I have a sort of foreboding that everything will go wrong, and she will say—Oh, well, it does not matter what she says, so long as—so long as she does not do things." Now, in the Vansittart household "doing things" meant, in Aunt Matilda's case, making a new will, and it was with the most gloomy forebodings that Joyce got into the carriage with her aunt, and saw the horses starting off with their heads in the direction of Fernside, where old Miss Harcourt lived.

The old lady received aunt and niece with but grim looks of welcome. "Oh, it is you?" was her greeting to the elder lady. "And who is this young fly-away you have brought with you?"

"My dear aunt, it is Joyce, poor Robert's daughter."

"Poor Robert! Yes, I remember he made a hash of his life by marrying that silly little fool over at somewhere-or-other Parsonage," snapped the old lady, eyeing the girl from head to foot. "Well," she said, with a sort of jerk, "if you are poor Robert's daughter, you might say, 'How do you do?' to a body. H'm! The way the young people of the present day are brought up beats my comprehension, it beats me altogether—a young chip coming into an old lady's presence, and standing there staring, as if she was gone, for all the world, clean fond

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out of her mind." It was a regular habit of old Miss Harcourt's, when she wished to annoy her relations, to relapse into provincialisms of the most pronounced kind.

Mrs Vansittart bottled down her disgust, and answered as quietly as might be. "I am sure, Aunt Matilda, you would not like it if Joyce was forward and flippant, would you?" she said, in her most bland tones. "You have not given the poor child a chance of saying 'How do you do?' or any other pleasant thing."

"Oh, I have not; then how do you do, Robert Joyce's daughter?"

"Quite well, thank you, Robert Joyce's aunt," said Joyce.

Mrs Vansittart gave a groan, and cast a warning glance at her niece. The very mild display of spirit brought a grim smile to the terrible old lady's lips. "Ah, that is a touch of the true Harcourt spirit; your mother would never have answered me like that, young madam," she said. "Well, sit you down, niece Emilia; did you receive my letter?"

"I did, Aunt Matilda, and I came over about it. I am sorry, but—"

"Which of the girls is coming?" broke in the old lady.

"Well, neither of my girls can possibly come," said Mrs Vansittart, smoothly.

"And why not, pray?"

"Well, Rosamond's young man is coming for a week, so I could not expect the poor child to spend it paying a visit to somebody else, could I?"

"I don't know what she wants a young man for ;

Aunt Matilda

I never wasted my time in such folly," growled the old lady. "And the other? I don't know what her ridiculous name is."

"Her name is 'Kathleen,' Aunt Matilda; I think it a very pretty name," said Mrs Vansittart. "I am sorry that she is not at all well, and therefore it is quite out of the question for her to be even out of doors for a few days."

"And what is the matter with her?"

"She has a very heavy cold, Aunt Matilda."

"I never have colds," snorted the old lady. "I don't know what the girls in this wishy-washy generation are coming to. Look at me, your great-aunt, ninety-three next birthday, and a pattern of deportment to all of you."

"You are wonderful, Aunt Matilda," said Mrs Vansittart; "but then it is not everybody who is blessed with such a marvellous constitution as you."

"I have done nothing to try it," replied the old lady. "Well, so you cannot let me have one of the girls? I am not ill, I don't want nursing, I have got a maid that does everything for me and knows my ways, I trained her myself; but she is stupid when I set her to play patience and cribbage and that other new-fangled thing, Polish something, and she gets sleepy, so that I feel more like boxing her ears than anything else. I only want a little company to enliven me up."

"I brought Joyce over; I thought that as she was well, and young, and—"

"This," said the old lady, pointing to Joyce, exactly as if she had never seen her before. "Oh, you have brought me this, have you? Well, I will

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try her this once. The first time I had one of your young misses here she began to cry when I scolded her. I hope you will not cry when I scold you."

"I hope you won't scold me, Aunt Matilda," said Joyce, promptly.

"I had a young thing here," said Miss Matilda Harcourt, gazing into a far corner of the great gloomy room, "I had a young thing here who was some relation to me—I really get mixed up among them all—and she positively shivered when I spoke to her. Let me see, was she staying with you, Emelia; I fancy you brought her here?"

Mrs Vansittart cast a comprehensive glance at Joyce. "Perhaps it was, Aunt Matilda. Don't say it was you, dear, she has forgotten you," she added in an undertone to Joyce.

"Well, I don't want that sort of person here again. I cannot stand your sensitive bread-and-butter misses, all nerves and megrims, for during this last year or two I have started something pretty near akin to nerves and megrims of my own, and they are quite as much as I can find patience for. Can you play cribbage, Robert Harcourt's daughter?"

"Oh, yes, I can play cribbage," returned Joyce. In truth, the girl was wound up to desperation. She felt that, as her aunt had truly said, it was a way in which to return the kindness that had been shown her, and she determined that she would go through with this extremely unpleasant duty, ay, and to the bitter end.

"How many patiences do you know?"

"I know a good many—eight or ten."

"Well, you may stop. If I don't like her I shall

Aunt Matilda

pack her back, so you need not be surprised if you get her before bedtime."

"But surely, Aunt Matilda, you would not be so inhospitable as that: you will give the child a chance?"

"But, Aunt Emelia," put in Joyce—and surely her new-found bravery was the boldness of a lamb brought to bay—"but, Aunt Emelia, you forget that I have not come here for my own pleasure, but for Miss—for Aunt Matilda's."

"My pleasure indeed," snorted Miss Matilda.

"And for Aunt Matilda's edification, and if I don't edify her, the sooner she gets rids of me and sends me back the better."

"Well, well, we shall see," said Mrs Vansittart. In truth, she was aching to get out of the house and leave poor Joyce to her fate. "My dear," she whispered, as Aunt Matilda went clattering on her high heels to a cupboard in the wainscoting to get out a bottle of her most precious cordial, "I believe you have hit on her right note. How pleased she was when you stood up to her just now; you never know what will take her; I believe we have all been too pleasant all this time."

"Well, I will do my best," said the girl, doubtfully; "but don't be surprised if she sends me back like a bad penny."

"Well, do your best, my dear, do your best; after all, nobody can do more, but whatever you do, don't let those Gledderburns cut us all out."

"Now, young woman," said Aunt Matilda to Joyce, when they were left alone, "come and sit down here; I want to look at you. Yes, sit on that

Love and Twenty

stool. H'm! You are like your father, you are improved since I saw you last time, then you were a frightened thing that shuddered every time I spoke to you."

"I am just as frightened now," said Joyce.

"Oh, you are, are you? And what are you frightened of, pray?"

"Well, of your sharp tongue for one thing, Aunt Matilda," the girl replied. "Though I don't see why I should be frightened of you, because, after all, hard words break no bones, and Aunt Emelia wished me to come, and so I have come to oblige her. I wonder if you would answer me something," she went on, driving home the advantage she had made, "Why did you pretend just now that you did not know who I was, and that you had never seen me before?"

"Because I chose to do so," returned the old lady; "I have not got to ask leave of a chit like you."

"Not at all," said Joyce, "I only wanted to know—I—"

"I suppose you did not like coming, then?" said the old lady.

"Not much, but I only dislike coming because you hate me so, and I always seem to say the wrong thing, and do everything to displease you."

"You are a stupid little owl," said the old lady, "and I don't know what your father could have been thinking of to marry your mother, nor what Emelia Vansittart could have been thinking of to go and cart you over here, as if she had no children of her own to bring up. However, you are here, and so I must put up with you, and you must try and make

Aunt Matilda

yourself useful. Mind you, I am not pleased with Emelia Vansittart for palming you off on me when she could well have sent one of her own girls. Well, first of all, I want you to write a letter for me—I hate writing letters myself, because when I sit down to write one it makes me feel that I am growing old.”

The girl rose up from the low stool, where she had seated herself in obedience to Aunt Matilda’s command, and moved to the quaint old oak writing-table that stood a little way from the fire. All the furniture at Fernside was dark and gloomy. The room in which they were seated was the library, a vast apartment lined with books, standing in massive carved oak bookcases. The furniture was all of oak, and black and shining with age. The carpet was of luxurious Oriental manufacture and the curtains were velvet, deep-toned and rich with age. The huge fireplace upon the open hearth was supported by great dogs. Priceless china, mostly blue in tone, decorated the tall, carved mantelshelf and a great press between the windows.

In the midst of all this dignified grandeur the old lady pattered about, looking more like a monkey in a rich silken gown than a human being. “Sit there and write ‘Dear sir,’ she said, tapping the table with one skinny forefinger. ‘Miss Matilda Harcourt bids me say that she will be obliged if you will come over to Fernside at your earliest convenience, when you have a couple of hours to spare. She will be pleased to receive you at luncheon any day this week, the earlier the better, as she wishes to consult you as to the final disposition of her property.’ Do you know what that means?” said the old lady.

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"I suppose it means that you are going to make a new will."

"Yes, I am not accustomed to have my wishes thwarted," said the old lady, viciously.

"And you are going to cut Aunt Emelia off because I came?"

"I am not accustomed to have my wishes thwarted," repeated Miss Matilda.

"Then," said the girl, standing bolt upright, and looking at her with flashing eyes, "I think you are an unjust, insincere, wicked woman. Now, that's flat!"

"Tut, tut, tut," said the old lady. "Sit down and finish your letter, miss, and don't give yourself any of your airs and graces. What did I say when I consented to your stopping? I have not said I was going to cut Emelia Vansittart off at all. Don't jump at conclusions, young woman, before you are quite sure how far you want to jump, and what there is on the other side. Take the advice of an old woman who has seen the world, a great deal of the world, and knows more than you are ever likely to know, and don't put two and two together quite so quickly; it's a very bad habit. Sit down and finish that letter."

Aunt Matilda

CHAPTER II

THE day after Joyce had written on Miss Harcourt's behalf to her lawyer that worthy old lady received a letter from him. In it he told her that he was sorry he could not come over to Fernside for a few days, as he was suffering from a very severe cold, and felt that at this time of day he could not afford to run any risk, more particularly," he added, "as you must have, by this time, such an assortment of wills that you can easily satisfy any whim you may be feeling by selecting one and leaving all the rest to be burnt. You see, my dear Miss Matilda, I take the privilege of being your oldest friend, and of teasing you a little for putting so much business in my way. If the matter is really more urgent—I notice that you don't speak of being ill—send me an imperative message and I will make an effort to come over."

"Impudent devil!" remarked Miss Matilda. "I don't know what the men are coming to! John Haversham was always the most impudent fellow in the three kingdoms! How dare he tell me about the number of wills I have made; I will live to make a number more yet if it pleases me to make wills; I pay for them, ay, and I pay well too. Impudent fellow! Sit you down, girl, and write to him and say that I am not ill, thanks be to the Lord, but extremely surprised that he should write to me in that tone; that I have no wish to have his death upon my conscience, and that I am sure he is malicious enough to go and die of an inflammation just to spite me. Tell him I have burnt all my other

Love and Twenty

wills, and that I intend to make a new one, whether it pleases him or not, and that I will wait till his cold is better, thinking meanwhile that it is extremely foolish of him to have taken cold at all—a thing that I never do—and that he is to come over to luncheon the first day that he is able to do so. And now,” the old lady snapped, as her sharp eyes wandered to the window by which the room was lighted, “your eyes are younger than mine, child; tell me who is that coming up the avenue. As I live it is a creature on a bicycle!”

“I think, Aunt Matilda,” said Joyce, after scanning the approaching figure, “that it looks like Edward Vansittart.”

“H’m, I wonder what has brought that young spark gallivanting over here?”

“I suppose he has come to see you, Aunt Matilda.”

“Pigs may fly,” remarked Miss Matilda, significantly, “but they’re unlikely birds.” A glance at the girl’s blooming cheek served to set the old lady chuckling as if some special joke had come in her path. “Did you know Edward Vansittart was coming home?” she demanded an instant later.

“I knew that he might be getting a day or two’s leave,” replied Joyce.

The old lady made no reply to this remark, but one or two significant sniffs; but when, a few minutes later, Edward Vansittart was shown into the room, she at once tackled him as to the intentions of his visit. “Good morning, young sir,” she remarked in a loud and strident voice, as he walked across the wide expanse of carpet towards her. “It is a very

Aunt Matilda

long time since you honoured Fernside with your presence."

"The last time I honoured Fernside with my presence, Aunt Matilda, you boxed my ears; I hope you are not going to box them again to-day."

"That will depend upon your manners," retorted the old lady.

"Oh, my manners have much improved since those days," exclaimed young Vansittart, his eyes wandering to Joyce's blooming face. "Hallo, Joyce, and how are you getting on?"

"Well," said Joyce, with a glance at Miss Harcourt, "I think that Aunt Matilda dislikes me not quite as much as she did last time; we are getting on on the cat and dog principle, aren't we, Aunt Matilda?"

"I think that you are an impertinent young hussy," said Aunt Matilda, promptly, "and I don't know that this young man here is not another of the same kidney. I suppose that you expect to be asked to lunch?"

"Well, you would not like me to go down to the inn and treat myself to some cold beef, would you?" he retorted. "Surely you would not treat your favourite nephew in that way?"

"Favourite nephew! You impertinent young jackanapes!"

"The nephew you slapped many a time and oft, the nephew whose ears you boxed."

"You graceless young jackanapes," cried Miss Matilda, but her tones were distinctly mollified, and her sharp old eyes scanned the boy's fresh young face with manifest approval. "Well, well, you can

Love and Twenty

stay to lunch if you like: I don't say there's much, though I don't think this child here has been starved since she came to me. How is your mother?"

"Not very well, thank you."

"And the girl that is courting, the girl with the fly-away name—Rosalind, Rosabelle—"

"Rosamund!" cried Edmund; "an old Saxon name, Aunt Matilda; just about as Saxon as your own."

"Is mine Saxon? I didn't know it. It is only a good old-fashioned everyday name, and it is a great pity your silly mother didn't call one of your sisters by it."

"You asked if Rosamund was well!" said Edmund. "Yes, she has got her young man at home, and she seems to be all right from what one sees of her, which isn't much."

"And the other poor whiffy-whaffy thing?"

"Kathleen? Kathleen is still in bed with a bad cold."

"Thank goodness!" ejaculated Miss Matilda, piously, "she didn't come over here."

"And you were so angry that she didn't," cried Joyce. Joyce was beginning to lose her terror of the old lady, and to feel that a course of studied impertinence, thinly disguised with frankness, would stand her in better stead than a more conciliatory mode of intercourse.

"I wasn't well," Miss Matilda exclaimed. "Young Edmund, I did not take a cold and have headaches and other megrims of that kind, I—I—but I felt 'all-overish' and as if I wanted somebody to talk to, and so I wrote for one of your sisters; I didn't want

Aunt Matilda

either of them really. The last time that that whaffy one came to stay with me, she cried every time I spoke to her—I wanted the other one if I wanted one at all, and I was furious, and am still furious that your mother made me put up with this baggage.”

Edmund Vansittart turned and looked at his cousin critically. “Well now,” said he, “I will tell you what, Aunt Matilda, you have got the best of the bargain; Joyce is worth twenty of my sisters any day; she can do more things, and she is not afraid of the dark.”

“She is afraid of me,” snapped Aunt Matilda.

“I was,” interrupted Joyce.

“Everybody is afraid of you,” Edmund went on blandly. “Joyce pretends that she is not, but she is; I am not a bit. Now supposing I fetch my traps over, and that I come and stay here so as to liven you up a little?”

“Ho, ho!” cried the old lady; “so that’s the way the cat jumps, is it?” In reality, Miss Matilda was delighted that Edmund, who was her favourite nephew, had come over, and was evidently prepared to stay as long as she would allow. She hustled Joyce off with a dozen orders concerning luncheon, scolding them both all the time in a high-pitched, cracked voice, which was yet jubilant and full of glee.

“If I didn’t scold that baggage well,” she explained to him when Joyce had gone running out of the room, “she would get utterly above herself and perfectly unbearable; but, in reality, she is a good child; she suits me better than either of your sisters do, they are altogether too fine-ladyish for me.”

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"My sisters," said Edmund Vansittart, calmly, "are all right for other fellows, personally I much prefer Joyce."

"And so do I," said the old lady. "By-the-bye, I am going to make a new will."

"Another?" he exclaimed.

"Yes, and another, and another, if I feel inclined to do so. Why not, pray?"

"Why, my dear Aunt Matilda," the young man exclaimed, "if it pleases you to make wills till you are black in the face, who is to prevent your doing it?"

"That little minx who has just gone out of the room. She jacketed me properly the other day when I bade her write a letter to that silly old fool, John Haversham, on the subject. She told me if I cut out your mother that I should be an unjust old cat, and that she would haunt me."

"That I did not, Aunt Matilda," exclaimed Joyce at the back of Miss Matilda's chair.

"No, you didn't, child, but it was something very near it. I am a touchy old woman and I don't like to be thwarted, as I have told you over and over again; and as for you—just you wait until I have cut your precious Aunt Emelia off, and then you can cry out."

"But that will be too late," cried Joyce, demurely.

"Oh, oh, you want me to promise, do you?"

"I never asked you; I would like you to be just," said Joyce, deliberately.

"And where is justice coming in, I would like to know? Now, there is Mary Ann Gledderburn; I suppose she expects to get all I have got!"

Aunt Matilda

"Don't you think, Aunt Matilda," put in Edmund, with a wry face, "that it would be just as well to discuss this unpleasant subject—if it must be discussed—after we have had that very excellent lunch you have just ordered? Why talk about Mary Ann Gledderburn? I am sure she makes you ill every time she comes near you."

"That she does," the old lady rejoined fiercely.

"And I am sure my mother does not. My mother is one of the nicest women I ever knew in my life, the most good-natured soul in existence."

"Mary Ann Gledderburn is good-natured enough," snapped Miss Matilda.

"I don't know," said Edmund Vansittart, "I don't know; she may be, but if you like her so much, Aunt Matilda, why don't you have her to live with you, then you would always have somebody at hand as a whipping-post."

"Ah, you are a saucy young jackanapes," exclaimed the old lady. "How long do you think I would last if Mary Ann Gledderburn came here to live?"

"Ah, that I cannot say."

"Why, twenty-four hours, twenty-four hours would be about my limit. Mary Ann Gledderburn came here about a fortnight ago without an invitation, and she suggested to me that, as I am getting into years, which I thought most impertinent, reminding me of my age, I had better have her precious Susan Matilda, if you please—my own god-child and namesake—to be the comfort of my declining days."

At this Edmund Vansittart sat back in his chair

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and shrieked aloud with laughter. "Aunt Matilda! Aunt Matilda!" he cried; "will you adopt me? Now, do adopt me! You were to adopt her, weren't you?"

"I don't know what I was to do. I only know," the old lady continued in irate tones, "what I said."

"What did you say?" he cried with interest.

For once in her life Miss Matilda looked ashamed.

"Well, I really lost control over myself, yes, I did, and told her if she didn't get out of this I would take my stick to her. What are you laughing at, boy? Mary Ann Gledderburn didn't laugh, I can tell you, not she; she shrivelled, and then she began to sob in a weak, pitiful sort of fashion; I could have broken the silly fool's head. 'Give me,' I said to her, 'somebody with a backbone, somebody who can give me back a sharp answer one minute and take a sharp remark another; but as for your Susan Matildas,' I told her, 'I will kill the girl if she comes here!'"

"I tell you what I would do if I were you," said Edmund Vansittart, when he had recovered himself sufficiently to be able to speak, "I should make Mrs Gledderburn a present of what you intend to leave her, and then she would know where she was."

"I will send her twopence-halfpenny to-morrow," said Miss Matilda, viciously.

The luncheon went off gaily enough, between the young man's saucy appreciation of the old lady's caustic wit and her admiration of his good looks, and at its conclusion, when they had drunk coffee out of rare old dragon cups, when they had tasted

Aunt Matilda

Miss Matilda's choicest liqueurs, and even Joyce had begun to feel that she had been a fool ever to see her except in her true character, Miss Matilda announced that she meant to have her usual forty winks, and that the cousins should amuse themselves as best they could.

"But tell me first," said Edmund, "am I to go back, or shall I send for my portmanteau?"

"Is it me or the girl?" cried Miss Matilda, threateningly. "Now, the truth, boy!"

His eyes fell before hers. "You were young yourself once," he said, in a coaxing voice.

Joyce's heart began to beat hard.

"Tut, tut," cried the old lady, "I have never been anything but young; la, my dear, I am younger than you are. There, go your ways, send for your clothes, and this baggage shall stop here until she is married."

"And then?" said Edmund Vansittart.

She put up a withered little hand and patted him on the cheek. "And then," she said, "you two, the only two of all the rabble of relations that surround me, who are not afraid of the old woman, you two shall be the heir and heiress of Fernside."

TOMMY, DARLING

CHAPTER I

IT was Christmas Eve, and the wild winter's day had closed in a yet stormier night. Without the old house, which the Dangerfields called home, the fleecy snow was falling thick and fast ; roads, hedges, fields, hills and woods were all alike smothered in one great, soft, white pall. The little streams were frozen, the cattle were all in the sheds, the horses in the stables ; it was like a country of the dead.

But within doors all was different. Great fires glowed in the wide, old-fashioned grates, lights flashed everywhere, merry voices resounded from kitchen to garret, and everywhere there were evidences of young, fresh, buoyant, exhilarating life. For the Dangerfields were a large family, and they were a family to whom it was an unbroken rule, that it should assemble, root and branch, under the old roof-tree at the season of Christmas.

"Christmas comes but once a year," said the old Squire, as he sat at the head of the long hospitable board and surveyed the thirty or forty faces of those gathered around it—"Christmas comes but once a year. It's a poor heart that never rejoices. They

Tommy, Darling

tell me," he went on, "that Christmas is going out of fashion, getting out of date; that it is considered frumpish and rather dowdy to make any fuss or ceremony on that day of days. Well, I have only one answer to that to all and sundry—Tom Dangerfield of Dangerfield has never set much store on outside opinion. Christmas is the great time of the year to me, and always has been, and was to my father and my grandfather, and my fore-elders further back still, and it will be, I hope, to those who come after me. I hope, Pudge," he remarked, pointing the gleaming carving-knife at a young man who sat about a third of the way down the table—"I hope, Pudge, when you are the Squire of Dangerfield, you'll keep up the old traditions."

"I will, sir," said Pudge, modestly.

"You go on your own line, Pudge," the Squire went on, returning the carving-knife to its legitimate use of slicing the breast of a gigantic turkey—"you go on your own line. Nothing pays like it. There are some poor things," he went on, deftly carving as he talked—"there are some poor things who haven't any lines. Heaven help 'em!"

"Now, Squire," put in a tall girl from the other side of the table, "don't get glorifying yourself."

"No, I won't, my dear, I won't. It never was a habit of mine."

"Ahem! Ahem!" rose in chorus from various parts of the table.

"Now, mother, I ask you," said the Squire.

"Oh, don't ask me," said Mrs Dangerfield. "No, Thomas, you mustn't ask me."

"That's the way one's wife uses one after all these

Love and Twenty

years of wedded bliss," said the Squire, with an ill-used air.

"Well, sir," said Pudge Dangerfield, quietly, "you look very hale and hearty under it."

"Ah, yes, yes, yes; my looks never pity me. What do you say, John?" The butler, who was standing behind his chair, whispered something in an undertone. "Oh, yes, yes, yes, of course!" said the Squire, almost testily. "It wasn't necessary to ask me. It goes without saying. Oh, dear, dear!" he remarked, casting a glance along the table to where his handsome wife sat, "the world is coming to something. The carol singers have sent up to ask whether we would like them to come and sing to-morrow morning. We shall be having the postman coming next to ask whether we'd care to have the letter-bag delivered!"

"Come, come, Squire," said the tall girl on the right hand of the table, "you shouldn't snub a becoming modesty. Remember, every journal they see—not many—and all the small people round about, all din it into the ears of the carol singers that Christmas is getting out of date. You'll have to give them an extra tip, dear."

"I don't mind that," said the Squire, sturdily, "but I'm going to have my carol singers as long as I'm above ground—"

"Now, please don't, Squire! You're much too fond of that subject. I think it's very bad taste myself. We shall all be underground after a while. It's not a Christmas topic, Squire."

"I daresay it isn't," said the Squire. "I have no doubt you are quite right, Maudie. By-the-

Tommy, Darling

bye, if this weather goes on we shall be snowed up."

"We've never been snowed up yet, dear," said Mrs Dangerfield from the other end of the table.

"Well, not so that communication should be stopped, but snowed up as far so you ladies are concerned."

"Oh, well, there are plenty of people to make amusement. They'll entertain each other. Don't worry."

"Have you got plenty of provisions?"

"Heaps," said Maudie.

"Don't worry about provisions, dear," said Mrs Dangerfield.

"Besides," put in another girl, "it'll thaw long before morning. No such luck as a real good, old-fashioned Christmas and being snowed up.

But it didn't thaw before morning. On the contrary, the snow came down with a steady, noiseless, insidious persistence, and when the family straggled down one by one into the great dining-room for the Christmas-morning breakfast, the seven windows which looked out over the western terrace were blocked to the depth of a couple of feet with a solid bank of snow.

"Oh, my dear Tom," cried Mrs Dangerfield, "how dreadful this is! I've never seen anything like it. Why didn't they open the windows and brush the snow down?"

"Where were they to brush it down to, my child?" said the Squire.

"You don't mean to say that it's solid right down to the ground?"

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"Indeed I do; and I was obliged to set all the men clearing the road down to the lodge gates, otherwise you'd never get your letters and you'd never get to church."

"Oh, dear, dear, how dreadful!" said Mrs Dangerfield. "Well, all these years I've lived at Dangerfield I've never seen anything like this before. How lucky we've plenty to eat!"

As the last stragglers of the large party presented themselves they were followed by the old butler.

"I'm afraid there'll be no getting to church this morning, sir," he said to the Squire. "Jim and Keeble have been down to the turn of the road leading to the church, and it's quite blocked."

"You don't mean it, John!"

"Yes, sir, I do. There's a great snow drift as high as this room, and the Vicarage is quite cut off."

"Dear, dear, dear!"

"Shall we get our letters?" put in Agnes.

"Well, Miss Agnes, we may get the letters, but it won't be until quite late."

"I think you had better, none of you, set foot outside. If you took a wrong turn and you got into a snowdrift, you might be done for before any help could get to you. You had better make up your minds to enjoy yourselves indoors to-day."

"Yes, I think so too," cried his wife. "I'm not very keen on going out myself. Are you, Agnes?"

Agnes laughed. "Oh, no! I don't mind one foot's depth of snow, but when you come to twelve feet in places I think I'd rather stay inside a good brick wall."

"Well, what are you going to do, Tommy?"

Tommy, Darling

"I?" said Tommy. "Oh, just whatever the rest of you do."

Now, Tommy was not a boy; on the contrary, she was a girl. The third of the handsome Dangerfield daughters, she had been called after her father—that is to say she had been called Thomasine. Somehow she was a creature apart from her sisters, and the seven Dangerfield girls were always called "the handsome Dangerfields and Tommy." Yet Tommy was, in the eyes of some people, much more lovely than any one of her six sisters. Where they were tall and lithe and dark—dark of hair, dark of brow, dark of eye—she was fair and blue-eyed like some modest little flower. Where they were noisy and brusque and buoyant, Tommy was delicate and dainty. While it was Maudie who invariably put the Squire right on every subject and kept him from too much showing the absence of that apocryphal person who goes by the name of "the trumpeter," it was Tommy who knew where he had laid his spectacles, what he had done with his favourite pipe, where he had put away for safe keeping that important letter.

Breakfast over, the large party streamed out of the dining-room into various parts of the spacious old house; some congregated round the huge log fire in the hall, some sauntered into the morning-room, one or two of the elders found a resting-place in the drawing-room, and the only two left in the dining-room were Pudge and Tommy.

That Philip Dangerfield should have been known by the name of "Pudge" was a proof that a nickname may be given too early in life. The very name of Pudge suggests somebody short and fat; Philip

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Dangerfield, on the contrary, was very long and lithe of limb. As a little child he had been remarkable for his rotundity and his solidity of intellect, so very early in his career he had been dubbed "Pudge," and, although he had outgrown the reason for the name, the name had clung to him.

"What shall we do, Tommy?" he asked.

"Oh, I don't know, There isn't much to do," she replied. "The morning is so awfully cold-blooded, isn't it?"

"It is, rather. I say, let's go up and explore those top rooms."

"The top rooms? I don't mind. Won't it be rather cold?"

"Yes, it will be rather cold, but we can put coats on. A chap I knew the other day," he went on—"a chap I was at Oxford with—was exploring with one of his sisters in an old lumber room of his father's—"

"Yes?"

"And he came across a lot of lace—which, of course, the sister boned, I needn't say—worth thousands of pounds."

"You don't say so! I don't believe we have any lace in this house."

"Oh, we may find treasures of some kind. Supposing we go and see, now. The very last time I was up there, when we were rummaging for those eighteenth-century costumes for the theatricals, I noticed there was one wardrobe we couldn't get into. Now, if we get John's bunch of keys, we may find all sorts of treasures."

"Yes, we may," said Tommy. "It would be fun, wouldn't it?"

Tommy, Darling

"Well, don't tell the others. Let's go just by our two selves, because if the whole crowd comes they'll make such a row, and they'll turn everything into fun, and there'll be no doing the thing properly."

"Look here, Pudge, you go down to John and get his key basket. He's got two—one of the cellar and the plate-room, and the things that he's responsible for; the other with all the odd keys that have ever been found in Dangerfield since the flood, I think. Get him to lend you those. I'll fly up by the back stairs to my room and get a thick coat on. Where will you get something?"

"Oh, I don't want anything."

"Oh, you must have something, Pudge. It's awfully cold up there."

"Well, I'll tell you what I'll do. I'll put a cardigan on. I've got one; I had it for skating, you know."

"All right!"

No sooner said than done. The girl sped out of the room by the door leading to the kitchen department, and was off up the stairs which led from that end of the house to the upper regions.

Love and Twenty

CHAPTER II

"I DIDN'T know," said Pudge, as he and Tommy met on the topmost landing of the grand staircase, "that the empty rooms up here were locked."

"Nor are they," said Tommy; "of course not. But the old presses are—at least, a good many of them."

"But surely you've been into every one of the presses at some time or other?"

"Well, we have and we haven't. Now that one," she said—pointing to a huge oak cupboard which stood facing one of the windows of the long gallery—"that contains the wedding dresses of all the Dangerfield brides as far back as there were Dangerfield brides to be dressed. Some of the gowns are too lovely for words; some of them are hideous frights. We never spend money on fancy dress," she added reflectively. "When any of us want to go to a fancy ball, we fish out a dress that suits us and get it dry-cleaned, and then we create a sensation."

"Of course you create a sensation," said Pudge. "You'd do that if you went in a labourer's smock."

"I daresay I should," said Tommy. "Yes, I quite agree with you, Pudge. Now this," she went on—"you'll never believe what this little cupboard contains."

"Well, what is it?"

"It's a collection of shoes, some of them frightful, some of them quite the reverse. That one," pointing to another, "has a specimen of every kind of sheet that's ever been used in the place from the time that

Tommy, Darling

the Dangerfields first set up housekeeping in it. That one is full of wonderful old bed quilts. I don't know what's in that—we never could get it open."

"Have you tried all the keys?"

"Well, I think we have at one time or another. As for that long red velvet box, I'd like to smash it open, only the Squire won't let us."

"Let's concentrate ourselves on the red velvet box," said Pudge. "We might find strings of pearls, parures of diamonds—"

"Or paste," put in Tommy.

"Or paste," said Pudge. "We might find Spanish doubloons, or priceless lace, or all that's left of one of the Dangerfields of long years gone by."

"I hope not," said Tommy. She crossed the gallery, and pushed the footstool which stood under a great carved chair, much the worse for wear as regards its upholstering, across to the front of the red velvet box. It was a long box, covered with faded scarlet velvet and studded with silver nails, now very much tarnished. There were the initials N. L. D. formed in nails on the lid, and the old-fashioned lock was surrounded by a device likewise formed of nails.

"Now, the best way," said Tommy, as Pudge dropped on to his knees and inspected the lock—"the best way would be to go right through the key basket, take everyone, and as you try it and fail, put it in a heap on that side."

"Right you are," said Pudge.

For fully half an hour they kept at their task in comparative silence. Key after key was tried and rejected, but at last one fitted into the lock.

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"I believe we've got it!" said Tommy.

"Well, it's the first that's gone into the lock, anyhow," rejoined Pudge.

"Perhaps it won't turn," cried Tommy, a little dashed, but Pudge was already moving the key cautiously to and fro with his strong and firm fingers. "I believe it's going to do it. Don't press too hard; don't break it into the lock."

"No, I won't. We ought to have had some oil."

"Shall I go and fetch some?" cried Tommy. "I could get some from my bedroom."

"No, no; wait a minute. It's giving; yes, by Jove! we've done it."

"The red velvet box open at last!" cried Tommy, in what was quite an awe-stricken tone.

And yet, after all, it seemed to be no great find. The lid had fitted none too well, although it had resisted the efforts of so many Dangerfields to disclose its secrets. It was a curious collection that met the eyes of the cousins as they gazed into the interior—a child's christening robe, rich with lace, heavy with embroidery and yellow with years; long, voluminous skirts, tiny little sleeves, a wee embroidered cap—

"Oh, poor thing!" cried Tommy. "We ought to have that cleaned, poor thing!"

A child's little scarlet coat and black velvet coat, a riding-whip, a pair of little shoes, a portrait of a little boy, saucy, yellow-haired, smiling out from the canvas with bright, dimpling gaze; another portrait, rather larger, in oils of a young man in uniform; some gold stars, a pair of gold epaulets and a broken sword.

Tommy, Darling

"This is tragic," said Pudge, in a very low voice.

"Pudge," said she, "do you realise what all these links build up?"

"Oh, yes, yes. It's horrible!"

"What else is there?" said Tommy, in a faint voice.

"A man's white shirt, frilled and laced, and stained with blood about the breast; some faded newspapers dated well back into the eighteenth century; some old paste buttons, a gold watch, rather large, with a bunch of splendid seals; a commission in his Majesty's Army, torn in two, and the miniature of a beautiful woman lying face down at the bottom of the box. There's nothing else."

"I wish we hadn't opened it," said Tommy.

"Yes — there's something else," said Pudge. "There's a bundle of papers. Hullo! Why, what's this? 'Last will and testament of Hugh Dangerfield, of Dangerfield Hall, in the county of Suffolk.'"

The cousins sat down on the floor, their heads bent over the faded paper, and together they read the last will of the broken-hearted man who had once been Squire of Dangerfield.

"This is the last Will of me, Hugh Dangerfield of Dangerfield, county of Suffolk, being of sound mind and in the fear of God, with Whom I desire to make my peace. I have this day received the effects of my son, Nevill Laurence Dangerfield, lieutenant in his Majesty's Horse Guards. My only son being dead, killed in a duel brought about, I shame to say, by his friendship with my nephew, James Dangerfield of Altonbury, it behoves me, since, owing to the action of my grandfather, the estate is not entailed

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to decide which of the Dangerfields shall succeed and rule in my place. In order to mark and place on record my entire and utter disapproval from first to last of the conduct of my nephew, James Dangerfield of Altonbury, I herewith bequeath, give, and devise all property of which I may die possessed to my second cousin, Philip Dangerfield of Brewsham Manor, in the county of Norfolk. To this in the presence of witnesses I set my hand and seal this twenty-ninth day of July seventeen hundred and fifty-two.

HUGH DANGERFIELD.

"Witnesses—

"John Malcolm, Clerk in Holy Orders.

"Henry Lorrimer, Lieutenant-Colonel."

"Poor old gentleman!" said Pudge. "Poor, broken-hearted old gentleman! Dear, dear! can't you see him gathering up all the relics of the dead Nevill Dangerfield, and immuring them in this red velvet box? It's tragic, Tommy, it's tragic when you think of the broken hopes, the humbled pride that put them there."

"I think," said Tommy, looking down on the floor and speaking in a very low voice—"I think, Pudge, that the tragedy of the present moment so far outweighs even the tragedy of those broken hopes, that I haven't any sympathy or any pity left."

"What do you mean?"

"What do I mean? Don't you realise, Pudge—don't you realise what all this means?"

"No."

"It means that *you* are the Squire of Dangerfield—*you*!"

Tommy, Darling

"I? You are talking nonsense!"

"I'm talking no nonsense, Pudge. You are Philip Dangerfield of Brewsham Manor."

For the life of him he couldn't repress a start that shook him from head to foot.

"Yes, you may well start," said Tommy. "When my father talked last night at dinner about the time when you would reign after him, he little thought, poor dad! that you were the rightful owner all the time—"

"Nonsense!"

"That it was no question of your reigning after him; that he has been the usurper, we have been the cuckoos in the nest— Oh, it's horrible, it's horrible! And to come on Christmas Day of all days in the year!"

"Tommy," said Pudge—"Tommy, you are not to take that tone. I'll shake you, I swear I will, if you say such a thing again! I'll—I'll—oh, I feel fit to smother you for putting such a thought into words!"

"It's not a thought, it's a fact," said Tommy, looking at him with her great wide-open eyes.

"A fact? Nonsense! It may have been a fact that the old fool wanted to leave the place away from the right line and the next heir, but that's got nothing to do with it. He had no *right* to do it, he had no right to defraud the unborn children, even if James Dangerfield was a bit of scamp—his own son couldn't have been any better. As for your being cuckoos, as for your father being— Oh, I'm ashamed of you, Tommy; I'm ashamed of you!"

"Pudge, how dare you speak to me like that! I'm

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—I'm surprised. How dare you say you're ashamed of me!"

"I dare say a good deal more than that, I dare do a good deal more than that. Here! it is only your word against mine. You can go downstairs with your wonderful story, you can try to upset everything at Christmas, you can—you can—oh!" and he tore the paper into a thousand pieces.

"Pudge, Pudge, Pudge! What are you doing?"

"I am doing a right thing. I have always tried to do the right thing. I am no cheat, I am no sneak. I'm not going to take advantage of a legal quibble; I'm not going to upset existing things that are as they are, and are best as they are. If you dare to utter one word— Oh, Tommy, Tommy, how could you say such a thing to me? As if I'd let out one word to the Squire. And as if—"

I really don't quite know how to tell what followed on this. They were both very angry, they were both very near to weeping; but somehow out of this tragedy, this sudden volcano of destruction, there came a little faint gleam of sunlight.

It began in Tommy's great wide-open eyes, it dimpled somewhere about her mobile mouth, and as one window reflects the sunlight from another window, so there came an answering flash of something that was not tragedy into Philip Dangerfield's face.

"You—you—" He stretched out a shaking hand, "Tommy, you—you— Oh, Tommy!"

The girl drew a step or so away from him. Pudge Dangerfield caught hold of her hand.

Tommy, Darling

"Tommy, darling, it will come to the same in the end."

"How?"

"If you and I— Oh, Tommy, you do love me, don't you?"

"You're not asking me because you—"

"Look at me! What do you see? Love—the love that has always been there—the love of my life. Kiss me, my own, kiss me."

And Tommy kissed him.

LADY TOWER SMITH'S GUEST

SHE was darning stockings. On the whole, I don't know that she objected to it as an occupation—which was as well. The truest philosophy of life is clearly that when you cannot have what you like, you should like what you have; and in the large family of the Freyvilles there were many stockings to darn, and there was nobody who liked darning them. So Ellaline Freyville, who was not one of the born family, so to speak, but a mere offshoot, the child of a distant cousin, and had been taken in so as to keep the sacred name of Freyville from anything so commonplace as earning a living, had absolutely no choice in this little matter.

"Of course, Ellaline," said Mrs Freyville, who was not perhaps quite as wrapped up in the traditions of the family as her lord and master, "of course your uncle—it is better to call the Squire your uncle than cousin—wouldn't hear of your turning out into the world when your poor mother was taken away, as you wished to do, in order to earn your living. The thing is impossible, so he says. No Freyville girl has ever earned her living in her life, and he wouldn't dream of allowing you to be the one to begin. You don't like a life of idleness? Oh, well, my dear, in a large household like this there is always plenty to do for

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those who are willing to do it. I can find you occupation enough. Meantime, you have your own money. True, it is only fifteen pounds a year, and won't go far in dressing you, but still it will make you independent in pocket money, and that sort of thing. And for occupation, my dear, just come to me."

Well, just at first after Ellaline settled herself down at Freyville Manor, she had several times gone to Mrs Freyville, "Aunt Emily," and demanded occupation. But not for long. Gradually, after the first strangeness of there being a new inmate in the large household wore away, it became the habit of the entire Freyville family to go to Ellaline for everything that was wanted in the way of extras.

"So tiresome!" said Mrs Freyville one morning when she came down to breakfast. "Parkins has given me notice."

"Parkins given you notice, mother?" cried Flora, the eldest girl.

"Yes, dear, isn't it sickening?"

"But why? There hasn't been a word wrong."

"No, but Parkins considers it beneath her dignity to be asked to mend stockings. She says, with a nurse in the house, the nurse should mend the little ones' stockings, not the young ladies' maid."

"Well, there's something in that."

"Well, then," Mrs Freyville went on, vexedly, "nurse thinks exactly the contrary. She doesn't see why she, who, as she puts it, has borne the heat and burden of the day, having been nurse to all ten of you, should mend stockings at her time of life—which she never did when she had babies to look after—with, as

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she puts it, a 'fine stuck-up ladies' maid in the house.'"

"The real fact is nurse can't mend stockings. Nurse's own stockings are disgraceful," said Gertrude.

"I suppose there's no getting rid of nurse?" said Flora.

"Get rid of nurse!" echoed Mrs Freyville. "Impossible."

"Not to be thought of for a moment," put in the Squire, in indignant accents.

"I don't see why," persisted Flora.

"Why, the woman's been here five-and-twenty years, stood by us in every emergency. The Freyilles have never taken solid service and seen it unrewarded. If you get rid of nurse it will mean her having a pension of at least a pound a week and a cottage as long as she lives, and then I consider that we should have grossly insulted her."

"The stockings must be mended," said Flora.

"No, no," cried her mother. "It was nurse who saved my life that time I was so ill. You remember, Archibald?"

"Of course I do."

"And it was nurse who closed dear Billy's eyes—Flora, my dear, never let me hear you say that again. But still, of course, stocking-mending is a thing to be reckoned with." Her reflective eyes wandered down the table and stopped as they reached Ellaline.

"Oh, I'll mend the stockings with pleasure," she said, answering the look. "I couldn't make a dress

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to save my life, but I can mend stockings with anybody."

"I should think the girls could mend their own stockings," said the Squire, testily.

If the girls looked rather blank their father was occupied in serving a game pie and did not notice it.

"Yes, yes, of course. But the children cannot," said his wife, soothingly. "And I shall be immensely obliged, Ellaline, if you will help me out. Parkins is such a treasure. I should never get anybody to make the girls' dresses as she does, and with three girls out it is such a consideration."

So the new state of affairs began. For a week or so the three elder daughters of the house of Freyville made a valiant effort to mend each her own stockings. Then gradually the duty devolved upon Ellaline, not as a duty exactly—the Freyvilles were too well-bred and too kind to make their cousin's life a burden to her; but Gertrude began,—

"Oh, Ellaline, you are so clever at this kind of thing. I can't make these holes come up. Look at them."

"Oh, my dear!" cried Ellaline. "How dreadful! You can't possibly wear it. Here, give it to me. I'll do it for you."

And straightway Ellaline's ruthless scissors cut out the cobbled lump of wool, and the convent-bred girl very soon reduced the much-mangled footgear to something like order.

Needless to say Gertrude never mended a pair of stockings again, and very soon her example was followed by Flora and Ethelwyn. This was but

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the beginning. Mrs Freyville anxiously consulted her niece as to the French accent of her younger girls.

"Tell me now, candidly, what you think, Ellaline," was the way she put it.

"Well, Aunt Emily, they haven't got any accent at all. They're—well—at least they have the most terrible English pronunciation. You must speak French well enough yourself to know that."

"No, my dear, my education was—you know, in those days—you understand—"

"I see," said Ellaline.

"I do wish—it really would be kind of you, and I don't know anything that would please the Squire more than if you would er—just—er—talk a little French to them when you go for walks. You understand. Not lessons, of course. I consider Miss Jones is quite fitted to attend to the grammar, but their accent, you know. Now, the elder girls, they're all right."

"Are they?" said Ellaline, quietly.

"Aren't they?" echoed Mrs Freyville, sharply.

"Well, a little better than the children."

"Ah, well, they have no time to think of improving their minds; but it certainly would be a tremendous advantage if the little ones could be improved in that direction."

And so it became the custom in the family that Ellaline should always accompany the schoolroom team on their walks, and that she should impart as much as was possible of her French acquired in Paris

So three years went by. Gradually, imper-

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ceptibly, quite without intention, Ellaline got pushed more and more into the background, and upon her devolved more and more responsibility and yet many more duties—the care of Mrs Freyville's lovely old china, the mending of Mrs Freyville's priceless point lace, a little attention to Mrs Freyville's charming fernery, and a general sense of responsibility in every department of the house. And so gradually Ellaline had been quietly pushed out of all social matters.

"Isn't Ellaline going to this garden-party?" the Squire asked one day.

His wife looked doubtful. "Well—three girls—I suppose you're going too?"

"Oh, well, I shall go in the dog-cart."

"Yes, but that makes four in the carriage—four garden-party frocks all squashed in together. A fifth would ruin everything."

"I could take Ellaline with me," said the Squire.

"Oh, I don't mind about going," said Ellaline, who knew exactly how her aunt's mind was working. "I'll stay at home. I don't want to go."

"Well," observed her aunt, looking much relieved, "with three girls it is such a responsibility. If I had a dozen boys at home I shouldn't mind, but—three girls—"

"Oh, I'll stay at home," said Ellaline. "I detest garden-parties."

And so it was settled. It was the usual thing; if Ellaline did not have what she liked, she made up her mind that she would like what she had, and it got at last to be an accepted fact, even by the

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Squire, that Ellaline would not make an addition to any parties that might be in progress.

It was the Christmas after she was twenty years old that the Freyilles gave a dance. It was an old-fashioned Christmas. Hunting had long been stopped; skating, tobogganing and hockey were all in full swing, and the accommodation of Freyville Manor was used up to the last little bachelor bedroom. It was always a terribly busy time, the busiest time of the whole year, for it was traditional in the Freyville family to keep up the festival of Christmas with all the old-fashioned observances—Christmas tree for the family on Christmas Eve with a supper of frumenti and other out-of-date dishes; with feasts for the children in the village, and much decorating of the lovely old house; with carol singers, and great anxiety about the church services; and with a general air of jollity which sometimes was more than half make-believe. But there was no make-believe about the dance, or the servants' dance which would follow it the next evening.

True, there was a little difficulty about Ellaline's frock.

"I don't go out," said Ellaline. "It isn't worth buying a ball dress for me."

"And she *is* so tall," said Mrs Freyville, as if to be tall was the greatest misfortune in the world, "else one of the girls could have lent her a frock."

"It's all right, Aunt Emily. Nobody will want to dance with me; don't worry," said Ellaline.

"I suppose you wouldn't like," suggested Mrs Freyville later on, when all the details of the dance

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had been settled, "I suppose you wouldn't like to put on your white silk frock and come down in that?"

"A high neck would look rather conspicuous, wouldn't it?" said Ellaline, sensibly. "Is there anything that you particularly want me to do?"

"Well, not exactly that; but those servants, they're so feather-headed. I'm sure the buffet will never get properly looked after."

"You want me to take charge of the buffet, Aunt Emily?"

"No, I don't want you to do it; but, if you did, it would be a kindness."

Ellaline laughed out loud. "Oh, Aunt Emily, why didn't you say so straight? You know I'll do anything I can to make things go easier."

So the anxious mind of Mrs Freyville was set at rest. She also had a lingering thought in her mind that possibly, for extra dances, her niece's brilliant waltz music might be utilised.

For once, however, she went too far on the delicate ground of the Freyville pride. Scarcely had Ellaline taken up her position at the buffet on the night of the dance before the Squire came bustling up to his wife.

"Emily," he said sharply, "what is Ellaline doing down here to-night?"

"Well, dear, you wouldn't shut the poor child up altogether, would you?"

"No, certainly not. I should have given her a proper ball dress, and let her enjoy herself like other girls. She's my niece, she's a Freyville born, yet

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there she is standing behind the buffet among the servants. I object to it."

"My dear boy, she offered!"

"Offered! What! Without a hint from you? Go and fetch her out of that. You forget, Mrs Freyville"—the Squire only addressed his wife in this way when he was excessively angry—"you forget, Mrs Freyville, that your niece is to the manner born, the same as my daughters. I suppose, as you were born a Jenkins, that you can hardly understand the feeling."

With that he turned on his heel and went away.

Left to herself Mrs Freyville had no choice but to extricate Ellaline from the position of ignominy which she had taken up. She excused herself to one or two people who approached her, and flew to the gallery where the refreshments were served.

Ellaline, looking very tall and very *distinguee* in the plain frock of white silk which she had worn every Sunday during the past summer, was standing directing affairs behind the buffet.

"Ellaline! Ellaline!" whispered Mrs Freyville, sharply.

"Yes, Aunt Emily?"

"Come out of that this minute. Your uncle is furious. He actually spoke to me as if I had insulted all the dead and gone Freyvilles that have lived and died since the Conquest. Did you say anything to him about it?"

"Not a word. Uncle Archibald didn't speak to me. I don't mind. It is silly."

"Well, silly or not, you must come out of that."

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And—never mind your frock, dear, come to the top of the ballroom with me.”

“In this dress, Aunt Emily?”

“Well, it's white. It's high, but, after all, plenty of girls do wear plain white silk dresses.”

“Oh, I don't mind,” said Ellaline. “But don't expect me to dance with anyone. I really couldn't dance in a high dress; besides, I haven't danced for years.”

Now Mrs Freyville had no desire to introduce Ellaline to anybody. Her own children all took after her roundabout, sandy little self, and Ellaline was a Freyville of the Freyvilles, for her mother had also been of the sacred race.

As they reached the place where Mrs Freyville had stood to receive her guests a fresh batch of visitors arrived.

“Oh, my dear Lady Tower Smith,” said Mrs Freyville, quite gushingly, “how kind of you and nice of you to come all this long way.”

“I'm afraid we're late,” said Lady Tower Smith.

“Well, just the second dance, I think. I hope you have brought all your party.”

“Oh, yes, they've all come,” said Lady Tower Smith, “every one of them. Lady Helen Gilchrist, you know—Miss Trevor—Mrs Edward Fullerton—Mr Fullerton—Sir Charles d'Arcy. This is my second boy; I fancy you haven't seen him for ages.”

“No, but I knew you,” said Mrs Freyville, smiling at the tall, good-looking boy who bowed before her, “when you were in long clothes.”

“And here is Sir John,” continued Lady Tower Smith, indicating her husband, a tall, military-

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looking man with a fierce white moustache; "and with him Lord Tourmeline. Yes, very attractive," she added, in a whisper, "and very rich, and very nice. I assure you if I had a daughter instead of having all sons, I shouldn't have brought Lord Tourmeline to-night."

Mrs Freyville went forward a step. "So pleased to see you," she said, shaking hands with the new arrival. "I must get you some partners at once. My girls—dear, dear! I don't know where they are. And I expect their programmes are all full up long ago."

"I'm not dead gone on dancing, Mrs Freyville," said Lord Tourmeline, quietly. "I like to make a good impression, particularly when I go to a new house, and I'm afraid my dancing isn't up to my other accomplishments. I'd sooner stand here a little while if you don't mind."

He glanced round in one direction as Mrs Freyville glanced round in another. Her gaze wandered in search of her girls; his in search of anything that it might light upon. It lighted upon Ellaline Freyville.

"Is this one of your daughters?" he asked Mrs Freyville, indicating Ellaline by a look.

Mrs Freyville's very gorge rose. "No, that is not one of my daughters," she said. She might have added, "It is my niece," but she didn't.

"I should like to be introduced if you don't mind," said Lord Tourmeline in his quiet, self-possessed accents.

So Mrs Freyville had no choice but to introduce the precious visitor to "My niece, Miss Ellaline Freyville," and Lord Tourmeline promptly offered

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Ellaline his arm and asked her if she wouldn't go and have an ice or something.

The lady of the house bit her lip with vexation, but under such circumstances vexation is useless, and neither of her own girls came near her till a couple of dances had gone by. It was not often that the daughters of the house of Freyville found themselves in the proud position of having full programmes early on in the evening, and they were not disposed, any one of them, to make little of the opportunity.

At last Gertrude happened to pass near her mother.

"Gertrude, Gertrude!" said Mrs Freyville, in a sharp undertone. "Is your programme full?"

"Long since, mother," she replied; and she tossed her sandy head with a little assumption of coquetry which was almost pathetic.

"Where are your sisters?" Mrs Freyville went on. "There's a man here, Lord Tourmeline. I'm most anxious to introduce them both."

"Full up long since, dear," returned Miss Gertrude, flippantly, and passed on with a gay nod and smile such as made her mother's heart burn with fury within her.

Nearly an hour went by, and no sign did Mrs Freyville see either of Lord Tourmeline or Ellaline. Then Ellaline appeared alone, and apparently quite unruffled.

"Where have you been?" asked Mrs Freyville sharply.

"Oh, I've been about, Aunt Emily. Did you want me?" the girl inquired mildly.

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"Of course I wanted you. Where is—"

"Mr Tourmeline?" said Ellaline. "Oh, Lady Tower Smith took him away long ago to introduce to somebody else."

"No, no, no! He's not Mr Tourmeline at all; he's Lord Tourmeline."

"Oh, is he? I didn't know. You didn't tell me his name when you introduced us. I asked him and he said, 'Tourmeline,' and I've been calling him Mr Tourmeline all the time we've been together."

The girl was so unconcerned and so indifferent that Mrs Freyville shut her mouth tight like a steel trap and uttered not another word on the subject. Poor woman! The evening was quite spoilt for her, because her sandy-haired little daughters were running wild, and the most eligible young man that had come in her way for many a long day was not being made the smallest use of—that is, for her benefit. Nor did matters improve, although it was very late before the Tower Smith omnibus was announced.

"Dear Mrs Freyville," said Lady Tower Smith, "I want you to come over to lunch to-morrow and bring all your young ladies with you."

"Oh, thank you so much—yes. To-morrow at two o'clock? We shall be charmed."

But she never thought of taking Ellaline. And although the three Freyville girls, smartly turned out in brown costumes trimmed with sable, accompanied their mother on the long drive through ice and snow which lay between Freyville Manor and the Court, not one of them seemed to make the smallest impression upon Lady Tower Smith's very eligible guest; indeed, he devoted himself entirely to the

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married ladies, while the Freyville girls abandoned themselves to shameless flirtation with young men who were practically ineligible.

"What you are thinking of," said Mrs Freyville, vexedly, as they drove home through the crisp, glittering snow, "I don't know."

"Thinking of? We've had a lovely time, mother," cried Ethelwyn.

"Oh, yes, always the pleasure of the moment. You never think of anything else."

"What did you want us to think of?" inquired Flora.

"Why, Lord Tourmeline, of course."

"Oh, he never looked at us. But he's coming over to tea to-morrow or the next day—to-morrow if he can get off."

"Oh, is he?" Mrs Freyville's tone was distinctly modified.

"And he promised to come over and help us with the school treat on Thursday. He says he's a dab at undoing Christmas trees, and thoroughly understands filling small children's plates with cake and things. You mustn't worry, mother," said Ethelwyn, patting her mother on the arm as if she was a fractious child. "Lord Tourmeline is quite sufficiently interested in us."

It was quite true. From that day Lord Tourmeline haunted the home of the Freyvilles. He seemed to make nothing of the long drive between the Manor and the Court, and certainly Lady Tower Smith proved herself to be one of the most indulgent hostesses in the world.

"Really, my dear Mrs Freyville," she remarked

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with a laugh one day, when they met at a little dance at a mutual friend's house on New Year's Eve, "Lord Tourmeline seems to have taken up his quarters at your house."

"He does come a good deal," said Mrs Freyville, smiling. "I hope you don't mind."

"Not at all, my dear. I'm always too delighted when a nice suitable match is on the *tapis*. I should be perfectly charmed if one of your girls were to end as Lady Tourmeline. By-the-bye, which of them is it?"

"I haven't the least idea. Hasn't he said anything?"

"Not a word. Only that you're a charming family, and — er — yes, of course, expressed himself very prettily about deserting me, as prettily as a man could under the circumstances."

"I think it must be Ethelwyn," said Mrs Freyville, "but I really don't know. I can't see that his manner is the least little bit different to any one of them."

She was quite right, poor lady. It wasn't. If the truth be told, Lord Tourmeline regarded the three sandy-haired Miss Freyvilles as means to an end, and as nothing more. His intentions were serious enough, goodness knows; and although he had found a great fascination at Freyville Manor among the Freyville girls, both Lady Tower Smith and Mrs Freyville herself were equally mistaken in its identity.

About the second week in January the frost, which had held the countryside in chains of ice, began to give way, and the Squire's thoughts turned once more towards hunting and kindred pursuits. Then he came in one day with the news that Lord Tourmeline

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had taken a hunting lodge about three miles from Freyville Manor. Mrs Freyville raised her eyebrows, but made no comment, and the three girls looked in a startled way at one another.

"He seems pretty keen on the neighbourhood," said the Squire.

"He's coming up the drive now," remarked Flora.

And that day the mystery came to an end. Lord Tourmeline was ushered into the pleasant morning-room where the family were assembled, it being just the hour of afternoon tea. He partook of tea, made himself agreeable to everybody, and finally asked the Squire if he might have five minutes' conversation with him on a matter of business.

"Oh, with pleasure," said the Squire. "Come to my study. I hear," he went on, in his big jovial voice, "that you have taken Frinton Lodge for the rest of the season. I hope the hunting will come up to your expectation."

"I'm sure it will," said Lord Tourmeline, quietly.

The Squire opened the door of his study, which was just across the large entrance hall. "Now, my dear Lord Tourmeline, sit down there. Have a cigarette? You wanted to ask me something about the Lodge, I suppose?" said the Squire, catching up the poker and preparing to stir the fire.

"Not at all. I've taken the Lodge for the rest of the season," said Lord Tourmeline, very quietly. "I wanted to ask you a question on a very different subject. I'm going to be married, and I want your consent."

"My consent?" echoed the Squire.

"Yes," said the young man, steadily.

1. The first part of the document is a list of names and addresses of the members of the committee.

2. The second part of the document is a list of names and addresses of the members of the committee.

3.

4.

COQUETTE

CHAPTER I

"NO, I tell you it won't do—it won't do! I can't."

The man drew the girl a trifle closer. "Coquette," he said, "believe me, it would do, it will do."

"No. I—oh, you don't understand. I have been poor all my life, with the worst kind of poverty. We have always had a position, and we have had to keep it up on nothing. You are a man. You don't understand. Men's clothes are so cheap; they last so long. They don't go out of fashion as ours do. Three suits will put you right through a season, with just an overcoat and a Monte Carlo jacket. It isn't like that with us. We wan't a fresh gown for every hour of the day."

"But you are not dependent on your gowns."

"No, perhaps not."

"If you were less pretty, perhaps."

"I should not be so particular, perhaps, if I were less pretty. I should not mind about my frocks. But I am pretty. I have always been brought up to feel that my face is my fortune, that my future depended on myself, that I must marry money."

"But you love me?"

"Oh, yes, I like you, I like you so much that I never knew what it was to like anybody else in my

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life. You know that. But you are poor. You cannot give me all that I want. I know it is horrid and mercenary and cold-blooded and detestable of me, but I made up my mind years before I ever saw you just what I would do. And then you came along and upset all my calculations."

"How?"

"Well, I never thought of the love side of it at all. I took it for granted that I should love the man that could give me everything that I have been pining for ever since I was a child. I want a big house, I want a big income, I want horses and carriages, I want plenty of servants, plenty of frocks, jewellery. I want to go to the South in the winter; I want to go to Scotland in the autumn. I want to go to everything, I want to have everything?"

"And you wanted to have love into the bargain?"

"Yes, I wanted to have love into the bargain."

"Well, you have got love. Won't that content you?"

"No, I don't think it would. Oh, I know just what you are feeling. You have taken me at the wrong moment. You see that I am touched by you, thrilled by you, that every fibre of me is just longing to say yes and to fling every other consideration to the winds. But I am not going to give way. I cannot, for the sake of the moment, give up everything that I have longed for always."

"But love is not for the moment." The man's voice had grown very stern in spite of the entreaty in his tones. "Madeline, love is not, never was, never can be for the moment."

"It would be with me."

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"No. I won't urge you any further to go against the dictates—I won't say of your heart, but of your head. It is quite true, I am not rich, I am not exactly well off; but I have an income, a private income, and I would settle it upon you. That, at least, would keep you from all want. I have five hundred a year of my own; and—I don't like to boast of myself, but I am rising in my profession, and it is a profession in which there are many plums. I may be Lord Chancellor one day."

"If only you were Lord Chancellor now!" she exclaimed.

"Oh, don't put it like that. You hurt me. I regret that I should have spoken, because it's embarrassing for a lady to have to speak as you have done to-day. I regret it; I am very sorry; forgive me. We mistook each other, that was all."

He took her hand and raised it quietly to his lips. Then releasing it, turned and passed out of her presence. As the door closed softly behind him, Madeline Leroy stood perfectly still, just where he had left her. She heard him take his stick out of the umbrella-stand, and then she heard him open the front door. A moment passed, she stretched out her hand as if she would call him back; then the hall door was shut as quietly as he had shut that of the room in which she stood.

He was gone!

She drew a long breath. She looked round the little shabby London drawing-room—and it *was* shabby—with a long shuddering sigh. Then she turned and looked at herself in the dim chimney-glass above the mantelshelf.

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"It was wiser," she muttered. "What is the good of being so beautiful to throw it all away for five hundred a year. Oh, but I loved him, I did—I do. What a fool I have been!" There will never be another like him—never. There is only one comfort in it; he will never know that I care. He has gone away thinking me mercenary, thinking that he made a mistake, thinking that I am everything that I am not. What am I going to do now? Look out for a higher bidder; flirt, charm, coquette, show off my paces, get a bite and play my fish and land him without the gaff if I can. Oh, it is horrible—horrible! And yet . . . yet . . . to go on living like this, in some dingy little flat in some more dingy street in Bloomsbury or the suburbs, with this sort of thing," with a passionate gesture towards the shabby furniture, "while all the time my soul would be crying out for beauty, for wealth, for rich draperies, beautiful jewels, for ease and comfort and luxury. If I were to call him back, would it last? In a year, in two years, in five years, if he did not rise in his profession, should I be satisfied? Should I think the love was worth all that I had paid for it, all that I had given up for it? Oh, no, the risk was too great, too great.* And yet . . . Oh, Dick, Dick, Dick, you will never know what it cost me to stand outside the circle of your arms, to put myself in a horrid, mercenary, business-like light, so that you went away cured of your love. Oh, Dick! oh, Dick!"

And Dick was walking down the dingy Bayswater street, feeling like a man who had had a hard blow on the head. For months past he had been at

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Madeline Leroy's beck and call. He had haunted the shabby house which she called home, finding one excuse after another, and at last making no pretence of seeking for any. He had endured the entire Leroy family. He had listened to Mrs Leroy's bewailings anent the delinquencies of her cheap domestics; he had played up to every other member of the family. Tom he had taken to music-halls and smoking concerts, and other delectable entertainments such as his youthful soul craved after; Margaret he had helped in her art career; Julian, outside of his school, which naturally did not interest him, was body and soul, for the time being, devoted to stamp collecting, and for Julian Dick Massingham had pestered his friends and wasted his substance. Little Lily had always been his friend, always; and small wonder, for Dick had paid his footing liberally in the way of sweetmeats and dolls.

Well, this was the end of it all. She loved him—yes, but she did not love him enough. In the balance of her mind the pure gold had been easily outweighed by the mere dross. Well, the choice in such matters lay with the lady. She did not love him enough; and Dick Massingham strode away through the drab Bayswater streets, across the road and into the park, and there among the green of nature he fought with himself that fierce battle which comes to most people at one time or another.

So time went on. Dick Massingham went no more to the shabby house where the Leroys lived. At first the family did not realise the new state of affairs. Once or twice Tom Leroy came round to his chambers and looked him up, and after some weeks

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had gone by he asked him, half hesitatingly, if he had done anything to offend him.

"My dear Tom, not the least in the world. Come and dine with me to-morrow night. We will dine at my club and go on to the Palace afterwards. Offended, my dear fellow! I have been busy. I hope they are all well—your mother, my friend Lily, every one of them."

"Yes, they are all well," said Tom, a little awkwardly. "They are all just the same. My mother thought that perhaps as Madeline is away you did not care enough for any of us to come."

"On the contrary," said Dick, "I will come with pleasure whenever your mother cares to ask me."

So once or twice he went back, and he got through his duty admirably; made much of the younger ones, talked pleasantly and sensibly to Mrs Leroy, took with him small gifts of goodwill, and sat in the shabby room. His heart had been broken, but to his credit he carried himself like a gallant gentleman as though all was as usual with him. He found that Madeline had gone on a visit into the North.

Then a little later Mrs Leroy broke a piece of news to him, broke it with tears in her eyes and hands that trembled in spite of herself.

"So Miss Madeline is going to be married," he said. "Well, Mrs Leroy, I wish her joy. I hope the marriage is entirely to your satisfaction."

"I hope so," she said; "the man is very rich, and Madeline, you know, has always hated poverty. The others have been happy enough, Mr Massingham, contented enough with what I had to give them. Madeline has a different kind of mind. I suppose

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it's because she's so pretty. But I confess I would like to know more about this—this gentleman. He is coming to see me to-morrow."

"And Miss Madeline returns home to-morrow?"

"Not at all. He is coming up to town to see me. I don't know, but my mind misgives me."

"I am sorry for that," said Dick; "perhaps to-morrow you will find that your fears are groundless."

However, when Dick went again a few days later, he found that Mrs Leroy had forgotten all her domestic troubles in her horror at Madeline's engagement.

"I daresay the man is rich, but old woman as I am," she burst out, "I could not sell myself to him if he were fifty times as wealthy as he tells me he is. He is everything that one would imagine must repel a pretty young girl. Oh, my dear boy," she continued, in an agonised burst of confidence, "I had hoped it would be otherwise. I believe in love. I don't deny that money will do a great deal, but it isn't everything, no, not everything; and Madeline is selling herself. I feel ashamed. I know that you felt it—you have never told me, she never told me, but I knew. Believe me, there will come a day when you will be glad that she refused you, and she will bitterly repent."

"Mrs Leroy," said Dick, "I didn't know that Madeline had told you."

"She never told me a word."

"So you guessed it. Well, she will pass out of your life now, and later on you must let me come as I used to do. I thought that she cared for me. It's no use pretending to you that I don't care still,"

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he ended, with a pitiful attempt at cheerfulness.

"Madeline cares for nothing but money. But she encouraged you—yes, she encouraged you. Well, she has chosen her own way; she must follow her own inclinations. As you said just now, Dick, she will pass out of your life, and, thank Heaven, there is no other coquette among us."

Five years had gone by. Madeline Dormer had drifted further and further away from the still shabby house in one of the side streets of Bayswater. She was very rich; her wildest dreams in the way of position had been more than fulfilled. She was not a very happy woman, because she was ambitious, and so long as John Dormer lived and remained his plain, matter-of-fact, sturdy, dominant self, social ambitions could never be gratified. Of all her family, the only one who wrote to her with anything like regularity was her mother, and she, dear woman, held that view which is so common among mothers, that no matter what flights of foolishness or pride or fancy children may take, the mother should make no difference; the mother should always be the mother at all times and at all seasons. So never a week went by but Madeline Dormer received from the patient mother in London full news of all that was happening in the family.

"I have great news for you this week," she wrote one day; "Tom has been retained for a very important case by a well-known firm of solicitors. It may lead to anything, and Tom is so level-headed and so sensible that his only idea at present is to make himself worthy of the confidence that they repose in

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him. Then I have another piece of news for you. You remember Dick Massingham? What a good friend, what a good influence he has been to Tom the world will never know. Times have changed for him. At the year of your marriage there were several seemingly healthy lives between him and the Massingham title. His uncle, Sir Philip, died last Monday, and Dick reigns in his stead. Still more news, Madeline—more news. He came last night—the funeral was yesterday—and he asked Margaret to marry him. And Margaret said yes, of course she said yes, for, as she told him, she would have married him without a penny.”

KEDDIE

"I SHALL never marry," said a man's voice from the depths of a huge lounge-chair. "People are fond of telling me I shall change my mind, because I've got a title and a fair amount of money. My sisters talk about my duty to my family and the iniquity of letting everything go to a second cousin once removed. No, it doesn't go in the female line, that goes without saying. My mother don't care a toss whether the title stops in the direct line or not, but she says after a bit I shall feel lonely. I may, but I sha'n't take after her if I do, that's all. And all my friends say that one of these days I shall be caught, and that when I am I shall have it badly. That shows all they know."

"It's what people always tell one," said Graves, puffing meditatively at his pipe, and thinking the while of a certain little face at home in pleasant England. "All the same, Keddersleigh, on the outside face of things, you are as likely a man to predict marriage for as any man I know. What makes you say you'll never marry?"

"Because I know. It makes me laugh when my people wisely tell me I shall have it one of these days, and have it badly. I've had it, old chap, as badly as

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I could have it to live, and I'm inoculated for all time."

"So that's it, is it?" murmured Graves, sympathetically.

"Yes, that's it. The only girl I ever loved," Lord Keddersleigh went on, not looking at Graves, but staring hard up at the ceiling high above their heads, "loved another Johnnie. Now I take it, when a Johnnie loves a girl that loves another Johnnie, there's nothing to be done but clear out. So I cleared out of the old Black Horse into this regiment for no other reason than that it would bring me out here and at least keep me from seeing the other Johnnie having it all his own way."

"Is she married yet?"

"I suppose so. I really don't know, for I never hear a word about her. My people know her, oh, yes, but they've never mentioned her in their letters, as they don't know I take any interest in her—they think I haven't had it," he added, with a burst of ribald laughter that, all the same, had a ring of wretchedness in it. "I never see any of those women's papers that give accounts of weddings in 'em, with portraits of the victims, so, you see, I ain't in the way of actually knowing."

"Do you know the other man?" asked Graves.

"No, I haven't the least idea who he is, and I didn't feel like making any particular inquiries on the subject. But that's why I never run about after the women, old chap; I'm off all that kind of thing."

"I never suspected it," said Graves. "I've often wondered why you kept yourself to yourself as you do, but, by Jove! I never guessed at the reason."

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"I daresay not. It ain't the kind of thing a Johnnie cares to talk about to everybody. I wouldn't have told you, old fellow, if you hadn't happened to chum up with me as you have done, and nursed me through that last go of fever?"

"Oh, that was nothing at all," Graves thrust in hurriedly.

"Nothing—nothing at all, from your point of view," declared Keddersleigh in his mildest tones. "From mine, though, it's the sort of thing one don't forget, and, by Jove! if ever you go home just you go and see my mother, and you'll find out whether she calls it nothing any more than I do."

"Oh, I say, stop that!" said Graves, shuffling uneasily in his long chair.

For a few minutes neither of them spoke. Then Keddersleigh went on, "I don't know that I'd mind India if it wasn't for the beastly climate," he said, in the querulous tones of a convalescent. "It's all right if it happens to suit you. Look at you, for instance, you're as sound as a bell and as healthy as a roach; but it don't seem to suit me, somehow, and these goes of fever take it out of me horribly."

"There's nothing for it but getting away to the hills," said Graves. "You won't pull up as long as you stop down here. Fermoze as good as said so yesterday."

"I'll go if you'll go with me," said Keddersleigh.

"I don't see how I can. I've no chance of getting more leave just yet," Graves replied. "And, besides, it costs a lot."

"As to cost," said Keddersleigh, "you'll go

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as my guest if you go at all. And as for leave, I can't go alone. I'll try to work it."

In India it is not difficult to work things; it mainly depends on who pulls the wires. Keddersleigh was young, rich, powerful, and in very shaky health, and he absolutely declined to take a day's leave unless Graves could go with him. "He worked for me all the time I've been laid up with this beastly fever just as if he'd been my bearer," he said bluntly to the Colonel and the senior surgeon in charge of his case, "and he deserves a spell of leave if ever a Johnnie did in this world. You can work it, sir, if you will."

Eventually it was worked, and the two friends went off to Simla together. And with every day the invalid shook off the ill effects of life in the plains more and more, until a healthier-looking young man could not have been found in all the length and breadth of India. The leave came to an end and they went back to the regiment where, in less than a month, Keddersleigh was down with fever again.

This was the worst attack of any, and long before he was free of it Graves took upon himself to write to Lady Keddersleigh his exact impressions of her son's state of health. "I know," he said, "that it is Keddersleigh's wish to stay in India for the present, and to make as light of his frequent attacks of illness as possible. But the doctors are very anxious, and no man can go on having one attack of fever after another without getting the constitution thoroughly undermined. I hope you won't give me away to him, but I feel you ought to know."

He felt easier when the letter was fairly gone, and

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after that Keddersleigh took a turn for the worse, and there was some serious talk of sending him home by the very first ship.

Keddersleigh, however, refused to listen. "No, no," he said obstinately, "I came out to see some sport, and I've had none. This beastly fever must wear itself out in time, and I'm not going to be beaten by it. I never ailed a thing in my life till I came to India, and if a Johnnie gives in at the beginning he'd never be able to call his soul his own again as long as he lived. Give me stronger doses of quinine, doctor; you medicoes are so afraid of your own nostrums."

The doctor shook his head and left them. "Graves," he said, a little later in the day, "that young fellow will croak one of these days if we don't look out. Can't you persuade him into listening to reason?"

"You mean he ought to go home?"

"I do. Can you do nothing?"

"I'll try," said Graves.

And Graves did try. He opened the conversation by speaking of Keddersleigh's home-going as a certainty, at which the invalid caught instantly.

"I ain't going home," said he.

"Look here, old chap," said Graves, "don't you think you're paying that girl too high a compliment altogether? No woman in the world is worth a man's life, and that's what you're giving in this case."

"Do they say I shall die?"

"Yes, if you stop here." For the life of him Graves could not keep his voice quite steady, and

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afterwards he admitted that he had never felt so helpless or so lonely in his life as he did at this time.

"Well, then, I'd just as soon," said the invalid, tenacious of his own idea.

"She isn't worth it," growled Graves.

"Yes she is, though that ain't the question," Keddersleigh replied. "Eh, what, old chap, what are you looking so solemn about? Life's no such desirable pleasure that one need mind chucking it, especially if the main things don't go right. If I croak out here, I sha'n't feel or know or worry any more about it. If I go home and get well, I shall do all three."

Graves jumped up and went out of the room. For the life of him he could not have spoken at that moment. He went out on to the verandah and winked the scalding tears back from his eyes and swore a little under his breath, and then he took a resolve. It was that he would write again to Lady Keddersleigh. And so that same evening he did, laying bare his whole idea to her, and begging her to use her best efforts to persuade her son to go home.

"I am breaking a sacred confidence," he wrote in conclusion, "but I am sure it is the only thing to do, the only way in which I can serve him. Dear Lady Keddersleigh, the bottom of it all is some girl. I don't know her name, but he told me she was in love with another man, and he came out here to be out of the way. He never told me her name, but last night, when he was thoroughly off his head—which he is most nights—he kept calling out for 'Zita, Zita.' From what he told me she must be married by this time, but I think if you were to send out the papers

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with the account of it he would feel that it was all really over, and resign himself to the inevitable."

He felt happier when this letter was gone, and on its way to England, although the time of waiting for a reply would, he knew, seem interminable.

Keddersleigh did not die. One day he would be a little better, the next day a little worse, following the usual course of all such maladies. On the whole, however, the end of three weeks found him in a less satisfactory condition than he had been in any time since he had arrived in India.

It was exactly three weeks after Graves had penned his second epistle to Lady Keddersleigh that he received a telegram from home. "Coming out at once, Julia Keddersleigh," it said, and Graves shoved it into his pocket with a long breath of intensest relief, knowing that, whether his friend lived or died, he had done the right thing and could never be reproached with having unduly kept his people in the dark.

He calculated that Lady Keddersleigh would just catch the P. & O. boat at Marseilles, and that she would arrive at Bombay about the 18th of the month. He made every arrangement for someone to receive her there with proper attention and starting her off on her journey up-country. And sure enough, on the evening of the 18th, he received a telegram announcing her arrival, and adding that she was continuing her journey without delay.

His own telegram to await the arrival of the boat had said, "Keddersleigh very ill, weaker, but not in immediate danger." All the same, he continually found himself watching his charge with his heart in

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his mouth, and he counted the hours until his mother should arrive.

At last he went to meet the train which would bring her, and stood there scanning the different carriages with eager eyes. Yes, there she was, a tall, slight woman, very young-looking to be the mother of a big fellow like Keddersleigh, and with her was a very smart-looking maid and a carrier.

Graves went forward. Lady Keddersleigh knew him by instinct and came forward too. "You are Mr Graves?" she said. "I can never, never thank you enough. How is he?"

"Very ill, but not worse these last few days," he replied. "I'm so glad you've come, Lady Keddersleigh. You'll do him more good than anyone."

Lady Keddersleigh smiled. "I don't know about that," she said. "I fancy my niece here will do more than any of us. Mr Graves, this is the Zita about whom you wrote to me — otherwise Miss Vallenge."

Miss Vallenge blushed a fine scarlet colour as she returned Graves's bow.

"You have come none too soon," he said gravely. "Shall I take you to the carriage now, Lady Keddersleigh?"

She put her hand upon his arm instantly. "I've had a journey and a half, Mr Graves," she whispered rapidly. "There's been some mistake; she adores Keddersleigh—always has done. She has almost broken her heart, and — oh, yes," with a quick change of tone, "it will be nice to be

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settled down for a few days. It's a horrid journey."

They only uttered commonplaces as they drove towards the bungalow which Keddersleigh and Graves shared.

"I'd better go and prepare him," said Graves as he helped them to alight.

He found Keddersleigh lying in his long chair staring blankly at the ceiling. He was not smoking, for he was too ill to care for his pipe any longer; and Graves's heart smote him as he noted the sharp outlines of temple and wrist.

"Old chap," he said in a voice that, try as he would, he could not make an ordinary one, "don't be startled, your mother's come out to see you."

"My mother! Did you send for her? Am I—"

"Old chap," said Graves, "I didn't want you to croak without making an effort to straighten things out a bit. She's come too. There's been a big mistake somewhere."

But the girl Zita waited no longer; there was a rush of light feet, a sob, and a choking kind of laugh, and she was down on her knees by the long chair. "Keddie! Keddie!" she cried, "I've almost broken my heart!"

"But the other Johnnie?" he asked.

"There wasn't another Johnnie," she said, the tears running down her face and almost drowning the smiles in her eyes. "I don't know what you mean. Keddie, there was never anyone but you."

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"Zita—my Zita!" he murmured; and then he quietly fainted away. Then, when they had brought him round again, he said, with a weak chuckle, "Don't let Zita go; I want my revenge on the other Johnnie."

A TURQUOISE RING

CHAPTER I

"I NEVER heard anything so supremely ridiculous in the whole course of my life," said Myra Sherwood in disgusted accents as she sat staring hard at her mother.

Mrs Sherwood was a mild and placid woman, with the nature and something of the looks of a cow, large in person and bovine in expression. She stopped in her sewing and gazed mildly at her elder daughter over her gold-mounted spectacles.

"I don't see anything at all absurd in the matter myself, Myra," she said in her placid, even tones. "Because you have got to twenty-two without having had an offer, there's no reason why no man should cast an eye towards Brenda."

"You are silly, mother," said Myra Sherwood, her tone still more impregnated with disgust. "You seem to judge everybody out of such little motives."

"I never heard I was little-minded," said Mrs Sherwood, continuing her stitching.

"No, I don't mean to imply that you are little-minded—I shouldn't be so rude—but you bring everything down to a personal basis, and that is silly. I might have had an offer at sixteen, and I should

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have been old enough to take it and know what to do with it ; but Brenda ! ”

“ Brenda is nineteen,” said Mrs Sherwood, “ this day. A year or two more or less makes no difference.”

“ You must know perfectly well, mother,” said Myra, “ that I was years older than Brenda when I was nineteen.”

“ Anyway,” said Mrs Sherwood, imperturbably, “ facts are facts. Harry Dunstan has been coming here for the last twelve months—he’s ended by proposing to Brenda.”

“ To live on what ? ” snapped Myra.

“ Well, they’ll have to wait a little as other young people have to do—as I had to do in my time.”

“ And are we going to have Harry Dunstan never off the doorstep ? ” said Myra, vexedly. “ Brenda giving herself airs, and flourishing her engagement ring in one’s face all the time, making it impossible to go anywhere without rustling and coughing.”

“ Not at all, my dear, not at all. You needn’t be jealous of poor little Brenda.”

“ Jealous ! I ? ” ejaculated Myra.

“ Well, my dear, it looks like it. I wouldn’t advise you to repeat to anybody else what you have just said to me. It’s an unjust, stupid and wicked world, and that’s the construction most people would put upon it. As for Harry hanging about the house—he’s been welcome enough to hang about as much as he liked for twelve months past, and nobody has ever said nay to him, least of all you, Myra. Now he feels very differently about himself.”

“ Indeed ! ”

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"Yes; and he has a right to. He's going out to South America."

"To South America!" ejaculated Myra. "What's he going to do in South America?"

"The bank is sending him out. It's a great mark of confidence, for the pay will be good and advancement probably will be rapid."

"But you said that Brenda would have to wait."

Mrs Sherwood looked up and eyed her daughter thoughtfully.

"Harry Dunstan is young," she replied. "He has had to help his mother, and he has done it nobly; but although he has smoothed her last days, it has left him without a shot in the locker, so to speak. So far as the actual salary goes that he will begin with, he and Brenda could live on it, but there's a home to get together. Harry Dunstan's no fool; he doesn't want to take a young girl like Brenda out, and not surround her with at least as much comfort as she has had at home. I would gladly have helped them, but you know how narrow my means are, and so does he. So they'll have to wait for a year or two until he has put by enough to make a comfortable home, and to support her in accordance with his income."

"When does he go?"

"Oh, almost immediately—in about a month from now. Possibly he may not even be able to come back and fetch her; she may have to go out there and be married, but she'll go out in two years or thereabouts."

"It's not much of a marriage," said Myra.

"No," said her mother, placidly, "it isn't much of

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a marriage. You're quite right, Myra—in a worldly way, that is—but Harry Dunstan is young and straight and honest, a wholesome, clean-living fellow that we've known for twelve months past and seen nothing in to disapprove of. Mere money is nothing compared with what he has to offer. Besides, they'll be comfortably off enough. He'll have a manager-ship in three or four years, and men who manage banks have opportunities; their fortune depends on themselves. It's a career with great possibilities."

"And Brenda—likes him?"

The girl put the question as one drops medicine out of the bottle; her words fell out one by one; but if Mrs Sherwood noticed it, she said nothing—at least, I should say she made no comment.

"Brenda loves him," was the quiet reply.

"And you think Brenda knows her own mind?"

"I'm sure of it."

"And that she will wait?"

"Yes, Brenda is a faithful soul—quiet, shy, retiring, but sterling underneath. Oh, Harry Dunstan knew what he was doing when he picked Brenda out from all the girls in Northtowers."

It was well that Mrs Sherwood was occupied in manipulating a difficult corner and did not raise her eyes from her work. Had she looked up at her elder daughter at that moment she would have understood what remained for ever a sealed book to her. In truth the expression upon Myra Sherwood's face was agonising; it was also little short of diabolical. She was very pretty; tall, erect as a dart, quick and vivacious in movement, straight of feature, clear of eye, and dazzling of complexion.

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She was a girl who talked well, a capable young woman, with a clear, shrewd brain, and perhaps it was singular that she should have reached the age of two-and-twenty without having once had an offer of marriage, without having once attracted a lover, while Brenda, who was a little soft, pink and white, dove-eyed creature, had attracted more than one.

For a little while she sat there resolutely stitching at a beautiful piece of lacework that she was making, and many black and bitter thoughts chased one another through her active brain. It was hard enough that the curate of St Ethelred's had come during the previous summer for weeks and weeks, showing but too plainly that he had eyes for nobody else in the world but Brenda. Myra had been very angry about that episode. She considered that her mother had hopelessly spoiled Brenda—made a fool of her, was her exact phrase. She considered that when a good-looking curate, six foot high, with a lovely voice and a tremendous following in the congregation, with private means, and a decent family behind him, condescended to look at a little fool like Brenda, Brenda ought to have been made to see which way her duty and her interests lay. And Brenda had proved herself absolutely intractable. She didn't like Mr Osborne; nothing should induce her to marry Mr Osborne. She had even gone so far in impertinence as to suggest that Myra might take him in hand, and had hinted, quite plainly, that Myra would make an excellent parson's wife, while she, Brenda, would prove an ignominious failure in the same capacity. Myra considered that Mrs Sherwood would only have been doing her bare duty by the

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girl had she insisted upon her accepting Mr Osborne as her lover. But alas! Mrs Sherwood had proved as intractable as Brenda herself. She said that if Brenda didn't like the young man, that made an end of it. As if Brenda knew her own mind!—a baby like that!

After sitting for some little time, Myra put down her work, and with a word of excuse went off to her own room. There she locked the door behind her, and sitting down at the dressing-table looked at herself long and earnestly in the toilet glass.

So he had passed her over. Had she been mistaken? Oh, surely not! Surely not! For a whole year past she had treasured up every little sign of love, every little trifle that he had given her—a flower, a song, some new quaint toy sold on the London streets, odd numbers of the more expensive ladies' papers, all the small change with which a bachelor repays the hospitality which he cannot return in kind. And all the time his happy looks, his serious intentions, had been for Brenda! Brenda, who never in her life had given expression to an original thought! That little soft, blushing creature, who had scarcely seemed the happier for his coming. Oh, it was maddening! To think that the man she loved could be so mistaken in what was best for him; to think that he could be content to pass all the rest of his life with that empty-headed little doll! She was very sweet, very good—oh, yes; but there was nothing in her. And yet it was to her that he had come in the hour of his triumph; and Myra had been so sure, so sure that Harry Dunstan lived only for her!

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Well, it was no use sitting there thinking, grizzling, fretting, repining over what was and could not be changed. She had to accept the horrid truth; she must swallow the unpalatable potion; she must make up her mind to what she could not alter; she must hide the gaping wound in her heart. She had no right that her heart should have a wound of any kind, and yet . . . she told herself . . . we cannot help our hearts; they are not always in our own control. There was only one thing for her to do now—to accept the inevitable, to put a bold face upon it, to always wear a smile, to have a gay word for all who might cross her path, and to hide from everyone the fact that she had given her love unsought.

CHAPTER II

AT the end of the month Harry Dunstan turned his back upon Northtowers and his sweetheart, and set out for the new life which awaited him in South America.

To Brenda it had been a glorious month, a magic month. She had lived every minute of the time, from the moment that she opened her dove eyes in the morning until she closed them again at night; and now she was left with nothing but a big turquoise engagement ring upon her left hand, and the consciousness that Harry Dunstan loved her.

Still, she was very happy. She gave herself little airs and graces; she assumed little shades of superiority over Myra, which Myra was absolutely powerless to withstand. She started what girls in a

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poorer rank call a "bottom drawer." She was for ever making little odds and ends when she was through the day's portion of more serious stitchery which in reality meant her trousseau. "Harry will like this," "Harry won't like the other," was continually on her lips.

Her mother was indulgent, as mothers are.

"Hasn't she got any idea in her head but Harry?" said Myra, impatiently, one day about a fortnight after the lover's departure.

"Heydey, my dear, it's natural," said Mrs Sherwood, thinking of the day when she, too, had existed for a Harry.

"I don't see any sense in living in a dream world," said Myra, shortly. "After a while she'll find out the truth."

"Well, my dear, she'll find out the truth anyhow. Let her dream her dream while she can."

So life in the little house in Briggersgate went on; the mother indulgent, the sister contemptuous, the little heroine in Elysium. Oh, how wonderful youth is! Were ever such letters as those that Harry Dunstan first wrote to his little *fiancée*! She wore them next to her heart by day, and hid them under her pillow by night. She read them and re-read them. Some favourite bits she retailed to her mother and to one or two other intimate girl friends, but Myra seemed as if her caustic common sense had entirely dried up in her breast all the milk of human kindness. She never imparted to Myra one word of the contents of Harry Dunstan's letters.

So a whole year went by. Harry was firmly fixed in his billet and thoroughly liked his life and

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work in the new country. His descriptions were glowing; his accounts of the extreme kindness and hospitality of those with whom he had become acquainted since his arrival at Braiso were most enthusiastic.

"I am sorry for one thing," he wrote, when he had been out a little more than a year, "that I have any acquaintance whatever, because it is impossible to know people without it costing a certain amount of money, and I grudge every farthing that takes away from the hoard which is to make our home. Of course, as I have a suite of rooms at the bank, I cannot live quite as if I were an unsolaced bachelor in ordinary diggings. The British chaplain brought his two daughters to tea with him the other day; they are nice girls, and I should fancy when you come out that you'll chum up with them very well, my darling. By-the-bye," the letter went on, "there was something in your last to me which I confess I do not understand. If you really find it too irksome to wait a little longer for me, of course you have only to speak. Much as I love you, God forbid that I should keep you or any other woman to a promise if you are unwilling to fulfil it."

The receipt of this letter caused Brenda Sherwood to shed many tears. It arrived at Northtowers by the early post, and Brenda, after reading it, sent down a message to her mother that she would like a cup of tea in bed, as she had a headache. This was not an uncommon occurrence for Brenda, who suffered, as many young girls do, from occasional headaches; but when at midday she came down to luncheon, never a very elaborate meal in that small

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household, her mother at once perceived that something was wrong with her.

"My child, what is the matter?" she asked.

"I have a headache," answered Brenda.

"Surely something more than a headache," said Mrs Sherwood, looking at her keenly. "You have been crying."

The elder sister looked up, but after one glance turned her attention to her plate.

"Did you have a letter from Harry this morning?" Mrs Sherwood persisted.

"Yes, I had," answered Brenda, flushing up all over her face.

"Anything wrong with him?"

"Not at all."

For a moment there was dead silence. Then Myra broke it.

"Has he given you up, Brenda?" she asked.

"How dare you say that to me!"

"Really, Brenda, you forget yourself!"

"No, no; it is you who forget yourself. You have no right to ask me such a question."

"I am sorry. I didn't know it would hurt you so. I apologise."

During the rest of the meal the younger girl sat in silence. Then Myra, with a careless word, went out of the room, leaving the mother and Brenda together.

"What has gone wrong with you, Brenda?" asked Mrs Sherwood in her soft, sympathetic voice.

"Everything! . . . Everything! Something's happening, and I don't know what. Look here, mother, see this letter. What do you make of it?"

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The mother put on her spectacles and read the letter carefully from beginning to end. Then she folded it, put it back in its envelope, and laid it upon the table.

"Well?" said Brenda, eagerly.

"Well," said Mrs Sherwood.

"Tell me what you think. I don't understand it."

"I think it's queer. It reads to me as if—as if he wanted to be off his bargain. I should write and ask an explanation. I should tell him that you don't in the least understand what he is alluding to. Unless you do, my child?"

"I don't!" Brenda flashed out.

"Then write and tell him so. Speak quite clearly and plainly. He has not done so. His may be a feeler to find out whether he can get his freedom; it may be exactly as it looks on the surface. One cannot tell. Write quite plainly. Demand a simple and clear explanation."

And so Brenda did. She sat down there and then, and she wrote straight from her heart to the lover who was thousands of miles away, assured him of her undying love, of her infinite patience; explained that she was puzzled and mystified, begged to have a clear and definite explanation by return mail. "If what you say was a feeler to find out the state of my feelings, dear Harry," she ended, "I will only beg of you to be explicit in your reply, not to beat about the bush; to tell me the exact truth, to tell me how you feel towards me, whether you are altered, or whether you are as I am, the same as when we plighted our troth to each other. I am not very well. A heavy cold keeps me to the house, so that

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I cannot have the privilege of putting this in the box myself, but my mother will post it for me, and I entreat you not to lose a single day in writing a reply."

Brenda felt better when the letter was written and the envelope directed and stamped. Yes, there it lay on the table, a trusting, loving message from as faithful a heart as ever man had won to be his own.

"You'll go out soon, won't you, mother?"

"Yes, dear, I'll go and put on my things now," was Mrs Sherwood's reply.

She left the room, and Brenda, for sheer light-heartedness, went to the piano and began to play over some of Harry's favourite pieces of music. She was thus occupied when Myra entered the room. In a twinkling the quick eyes of the elder girl took in the situation—the letter lying on the table, the girl seated at the piano with her back to the room. She shut the door softly and crossed towards the fireplace. In doing so, she had to pass by the table on which the letter was lying. Brenda was still playing Rubenstein's Melody in F. There was a slight movement of a capable white hand towards the table, and in a moment the letter which Brenda had written had been thrust into Myra's pocket, while its apparent facsimile lay waiting for Mrs Sherwood's entrance.

Poor child! She felt so gay that afternoon; such a load had been lifted off her mind. For some three or four months past there had crept a certain element of doubt into Harry Dunstan's letters, so slight that she could scarce take hold of it, even in thought; but at this, the first tangible proof that something had come between them, she had, by her

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mother's advice, and following the dictates of her own heart, grasped her nettle, and had begged of him to let the truth be plain and clear between them. So she played, and then she tried over her lover's favourite songs to herself, fitting the air and the accompaniment into each other as she played.

And then Mrs Sherwood came in for the letter, took it to the post, and after a while came back saying that she had posted it, and bringing some muffins in for tea ; and Brenda was quite happy again, and even merry.

Well, the letter of that morning was the last that Brenda Sherwood received with the Braiso postmark. Her loving outpouring to the man of her heart met with no response. Little by little Myra wormed out of her mother, and then out of Brenda the ugly truth ; and after a delay of some weeks it came to be tacitly understood in the simple household that Harry Dunstan's name was tabooed forever. Only Mrs Sherwood and Myra talked it over between themselves.

"I should write definitely breaking it off," said Myra, "and send him back his ring."

"She won't part with it."

"Nonsense! It's ridiculous to go on wearing a man's ring, and he hasn't written to her for three months. It's so unmaidenly—it shows such a want of pride."

"Poor little thing, the ring does no harm, and she clings to it," said the mother.

"Let me talk to her."

So later in the day Myra Sherwood approached the subject of the engagement ring with Brenda.

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"Brenda," she said, "I hope you won't be offended at what I am going to say."

"I hope not," said Brenda, turning her dove's eyes upon her sister.

"Don't you think you ought to send Harry Dunstan back his ring?"

"Why should I?"

"Because—well, I have an idea of what you wrote to him, although you never showed me the letter. You gave him up."

"I didn't."

"Practically you did. He gave you up. He might have written to you; he might have put it clearly, without any chance of mistake."

"Something has happened to Harry," said the girl in a low, determined tone.

"Yes, my dear child, something has happened. It happens very often with young men who go away to seek their fortunes in another world—he's met with another woman, and the woman who's on the spot has twice the chance of the one who is—"

"Oh, will you stop! You don't understand!" Brenda cried with trembling lips and flashing eyes. "You don't understand, Myra. You were never in love in your life. I—oh, it's no use talking to you about it. The ring does no harm. I shall have an explanation later on. Harry has no more given me up than mother has given me up."

"My dear child, have you no pride?"

"None where he is concerned."

The elder sister uttered an exclamation of disgust.

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"Well, go your own way," she said with a laugh and something very like a sneer; "go your own way and wear your ring that has lost its virtue. Keep to your engagement that is no longer an engagement stick to the man who has deserted you—it's no business of mine."

"No," said Brenda, "it is no business of yours."

So the months went by. The big turquoise ring still adorned Brenda Sherwood's slender hand; it was more slender than it had been, and the ring had grown very large.

"Let me write to him, mother," said Myra.

"No, no, my dear, it would do no good. I have written myself; he has taken no notice."

"You have written?" said Myra. "You never told me that."

"No; but that doesn't matter. I didn't even tell Brenda."

"When did you write?"

"Two months ago."

"You had no reply?"

"No."

"Are you not convinced?"

"Oh, my poor little girl, more than convinced I could murder Harry Dunstan," the widow went on "To think of my child fading away before my eyes refusing to believe the inevitable, and I sitting here powerless—powerless to do anything. But I shall take her away, I shall take her to the sea, get her out of this, take her to London. It doesn't matter what it costs. I'll take a little out of my capital—

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anything to take the child's thoughts off the fellow."

"Yes, I would," said Myra.

"The only thing that troubles me—oh! I shouldn't say that, but the thing that does trouble me is what people will say. Everybody is noticing Brenda's poor looks. What was that? A visitor! How tiresome! Well, what is it, Mary?"

"It's me, Mrs Sherwood," said Harry Dunstan, at the door. "I got your letter. I have come in answer to it. There's something I don't understand. Brenda gave me up of her own free will."

"Brenda gave you up?"

"Yes, yes. Here's her letter. I suspected she was not the same, and I asked her plainly to tell me the truth because I love the child so much, Mrs Sherwood, that her happiness—even if it broke my heart—should always come in front of mine. I got this letter. Read it."

"Brenda wrote you that!" cried the widow. "There is some mistake here, Harry."

As she looked straight at him her eyes glanced past to the face of her elder daughter.

"Let me," she said, with quick mother's instinct, "put this letter in the fire. I'll call Brenda. Myra, go away, my dear. These two have a good deal to say to each other. I'll send her to you. This is all a mistake, Harry. I can't explain it."

Again her eyes sought the elder girl's face, and the expression in them said to Myra as plainly as if she had spoken in words that the

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explanation would be easy if she chose to make it.

"You'll find no reproaches, Harry," went on the mother. "She'll ask very little explanation. She's yours, Harry—almost to death. This has almost broken her heart. Listen! I hear her! Take her—she is a faithful soul."

MAGS

CHAPTER I

"YOU know," said he, "I am a poor devil without a ha'penny."

The girl looked up.

"Now, why should you tell me that to-night? Why—when we are enjoying ourselves, and everything's bright and gay and happy, the floor is perfect, the music is divine, I've got a pretty dress, and our steps suit—should you suddenly let fly such a bomb-shell as that at me? I call it most inconsiderate and most unkind of you."

"Yes, I know," he said, not looking at her, but nursing his knee and letting his eyes wander away down the long corridor, up and down which couples were slowly sauntering, "yes, I know; but it's on a night like this that it comes home to a chap. I'm going to India next month; and after that—I suppose after that the deluge."

For a moment the girl did not speak; but if her eyes were suspiciously bright and her underlip was a little tremulous, nobody would have guessed that any emotion was troubling her when at length she found her voice.

"How came you to be put into an expensive cavalry regiment without a ha'penny," she said.

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"I wasn't. I had pounds then. I've played ducks and drakes—not with my bit of property; couldn't touch that. But I went the pace. I started too big. I—oh! I've made a fool of myself!"

"Nature," said Margaret Dacre, "is a hard school mistress. You can't eat your cake and have it. If you go and sit in a draught you'll have a cold. If you lie on wet grass you'll get rheumatic fever—something. If you spend three times your income you've got to go short for the rest of your days."

"Oh, I know all that. I know everything. never cared until—to-night."

Then there was another silence.

"And why to-night?" said Margaret, in a very small voice.

"Oh, don't you know? Because to-night I want every farthing I've ever had; I want a fortune—want a million. Because to-night it's come home to me, as it never came all these past six weeks when I've been following you round everywhere, that there's only one girl in all the world that I can ever care for."

"You mean me?"

"Of course I mean you. Can you doubt it? And I'm going to India next month. I can't ask you to come with me; I'm not even free to go myself. I've got foreign leave—I got the news that I was to have it this afternoon—and I'm going out to Italy the week after next to see my mother, who lives in Florence; and then I'm going to join the ship at Malta. I'm not even going off straight; I'm going out by the back door. Oh, Margaret, Margaret, what did we ever meet? What had you ever done that

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such a miserable devil as I should come across your path?"

He was still staring dejectedly down the corridor; the girl was still watching him with a fascinated gaze.

"I suppose," she said at last, "that you oughtn't to have told me."

"Of course I oughtn't."

"All the same, I should have hated you to go away without."

"Would you? Oh, you darling! Oh, Margaret, you have made me happy in spite of my wretchedness. Yet what could I ask you to share? Poverty—genteel poverty, trying to keep up a position on nothing. If I send in my papers to-morrow, what better off am I? I've only one chance: I'm fit for nothing but soldiering. I've only one chance of pulling myself back, getting Gerrards' Place free; that is, to go to India and stick there, and live on as little as I can, until—until I've got things made square. I can't ask you to wait—"

"No, perhaps you can't ask me. But I might offer to," she said very shyly.

"Would you? Do you mean it? Are you true? Oh, how I curse myself for my blind folly in not waiting with just a little patience until I met you!"

"How did you know?"

"Oh, I knew it. I knew I should meet you one day. There's always one woman and one man in the world for each, and you are mine. And if I am yours, Margaret, if you will wait, I'll get free—I'll get free; or else you can chuck it all, and I'll blow my brains out to prove what a failure I am!"

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"Oh, don't talk like that! What nonsense! You are overdone to-night. It's a wrench going away. And you are vexed with yourself. But you mustn't spoil my last days because—well, because you were foolish in the past. All young people are foolish."

"You are young," he interrupted fiercely.

"Yes, I am young; but somehow I was never foolish, Mr Power."

"Don't call me Mr Power. Couldn't you call me Dennis?"

"Oh, I might, quite easily. I suppose I shall always have to call you Dennis."

"Have to?"

"Well, you know what I mean. Look here! you are going away. You say you'll get free. I don't suppose I shall come to you quite empty-handed. We have some money, you know, and we three girls are all that father has to leave it to. You save, and I'll wait. I can't save, because I've got nothing to save except my allowance, which just does me."

"But you are not in debt," he said fiercely.

"No, no; I'm not in debt. I was never young. Why, I shall be twenty-one next month, and I never wanted to owe anybody a ha'penny in my life. I never was young in that way. I always had an old head on my shoulders, I think; and it shall be older than ever if I can serve you. But you must be true, Dennis Power. You must promise, and you must keep your promise."

"And, God help me, I will!" said he.

Mags

CHAPTER II

FIVE years had gone by. Margaret Dacre was still engaged to Dennis Power of the Red Dragoons, and Dennis Power was still grilling under an Indian sun, and apparently as far away from freedom as when he had left his native shores. The burden of his letters was always the same: "This beastly country is a fraud. It costs ten times as much to live here as it does in England. If I could stay grilling down in the plains all the year, I might save a bit—even then I should spend all my savings in ice and pegs. One must go up to the hills. Murree is dull and expensive; Simla is gay and costly. I went to Murree the first year, and I spent money out of sheer weariness of spirit. Then I went to Simla and spent a fortune, getting nothing for it but the feeling that I am further off than ever from my heart's desire. Curse India and everything in it! One poor hundred pounds is all I have been able to send home in two years."

So five years had gone by; five years of *ennui*, five years of weariness, five years of hopeless dejection and misery, only broken by spells of gaiety in which he took no pleasure. Meantime a change had come upon the fortunes of Margaret Dacre.

"It's no use, Ethel," she said to her younger sister, after receiving another long and miserable letter from Power—"it's no use; fate's against us altogether. I've just had a letter from that woman at Norwood. She thinks I'm not experienced enough to teach her three little brats, and sew for them, and wash

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them, and walk them out, and all the rest of it, for twenty pounds a year. She'd like somebody who has been out before. I'm not going to hang about at home a day longer."

"It is wretched," said Ethel. "What would be all right for poor dad and the mother is hopeless discomfort when there are three great girls hanging around—five of us in one sitting-room!"

"Yes, it's preposterous," cried Margaret. "I've made up my mind I'm going out into the world. I'm going in a different capacity."

"You are going on the stage?" said Ethel.

"Pretty figure I should cut on the stage. I don't know a single actor; I don't know the way to the stage door, or the manager's room, or anything, you know that. Why, I should die in the streets. Where should I be on the stage? Don't be so silly. No, I'm going to London as soon as I can pack up my things—my suitable things. I've got a few pounds saved out of the last quarter's allowance that poor dad will ever be able to pay me. I'm going to make a few pounds more before I leave. As soon as I have arranged it I shall take myself off to London, and I shall get a situation as parlourmaid. I'll get a set of recommendations from various people here—one from the Bishop, one from the Mayor, one from the bank. I should think that will be enough. I shall get thirty pounds a year, and when I've been at it six months I shall be worth forty as a parlourmaid.

"Yes? In your own name?"

"Yes."

"How are you going to make any money?"

"Oh, I've various things I'm going to sell: my ball

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dresses—sha'n't want them when I'm in service. I'm going to sell some of my trinkets—things I don't value very much. I'm going to get a proper parlour-maid's rig-out. You won't know me when I'm through."

"It's plucky," said Ethel—"it's plucky. Cis, if you pave the way for me, I'm one with you. I'll follow you. But I think you had better go first, and as soon as you are established, you look out for a place for me, and I'll do exactly the same."

"All right. What about Wynn timer?"

"Oh, Wynn timer, she's got her little morning engagement. I wouldn't disturb her. Mother will like to have somebody left. She's awfully lonesome, is mother."

Well, a whole year went by. Margaret Dacre, now nearly seven-and-twenty, was the smartest parlourmaid in London—tall, stately, dignified; wearing the nearest approach to a uniform that a young woman could very well don, she filled the hearts of her employers with pride, and the souls of their friends and acquaintances with envy. I need hardly say that the house which she had chosen as her battlefield was of the smartest; and within a month of her entry into occupation of the butler's domain she had installed her sister as her second in command.

And then something happened. Simply this—that one day, when the sisters were arranging the dinner-table for a large party, Margaret, with the list and a bundle of name-cards, was marking out the places, she came upon a card inscribed "Captain

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• Dennis Power." She stared at the card for a moment, then spoke to her sister.

"Ethel!" she said.

"Yes?"

"Look at this."

"Oh, Mags, what will you do?" cried Ethel.

"Do? Nothing. I gave him up before I took on this new existence. I'm nothing to him; it's nothing to him now. You'll behave as if you had never seen him before; so shall I. He's a gentleman; he'll take his cue from us. He'll understand, when he puts two and two together—my letter and our being here—exactly how things are with us."

And that night Margaret Dacre cried herself to sleep. She sobbed and wept until she was exhausted because Dennis Power had so completely taken his cue from them that an onlooker would not have believed that he had ever seen either of the sisters before. She had said so proudly to Ethel that he was a gentleman; in her heart, during the long watches of that night, she would have been better pleased if he had proved himself less so.

But Dennis Power was a gentleman after all; for the mistress of the house, who had stayed behind all the rest of the family after breakfast the next morning, stopped Margaret as she was leaving the room.

"Shut the door, Margaret; I want to speak to you," she said. "There is a gentleman coming to see you at eleven o'clock."

"A gentleman?" said Margaret.

"Yes. I'm sorry to lose you, Margaret; I shall never replace you, because I sha'n't get another

Mags

gentlewoman, and I suppose Mary"—as Ethel was always called—"won't care to remain after you are gone."

"I don't quite understand," said Margaret.

"You had better wait till eleven o'clock," said the lady, "and let him explain for himself. Tell Moore to answer the door."

So when at eleven o'clock a loud rat-a-tat told of the visitor's arrival, the head housemaid was the one who answered the summons.

The gentleman was shown into Mrs L'Estrange's boudoir. Then Moore went down to the butler's pantry.

"A gentleman to see you, Margaret," she announced,

So Margaret, with her head high in the air, sailed into the room. Her face was set, her figure was rigid, her mouth was stern. And oh! so wonderful a thing is love, that in two minutes she had heard so much—how he had come into a fortune, how he had tried to find her and could not, how he loved her—that her aspect was totally changed.

Even then she made a last effort to hold back.

"You don't realise," she said. "I'm not the Margaret Dacre you used to know; I'm Mrs L'Estrange's parlourmaid."

"You are not the Margaret Dacre I used to know," he admitted, "and you are practically no longer Mrs L'Estrange's parlourmaid; but you are going to show yourself to the world in a new character—that of my wife."

THE END

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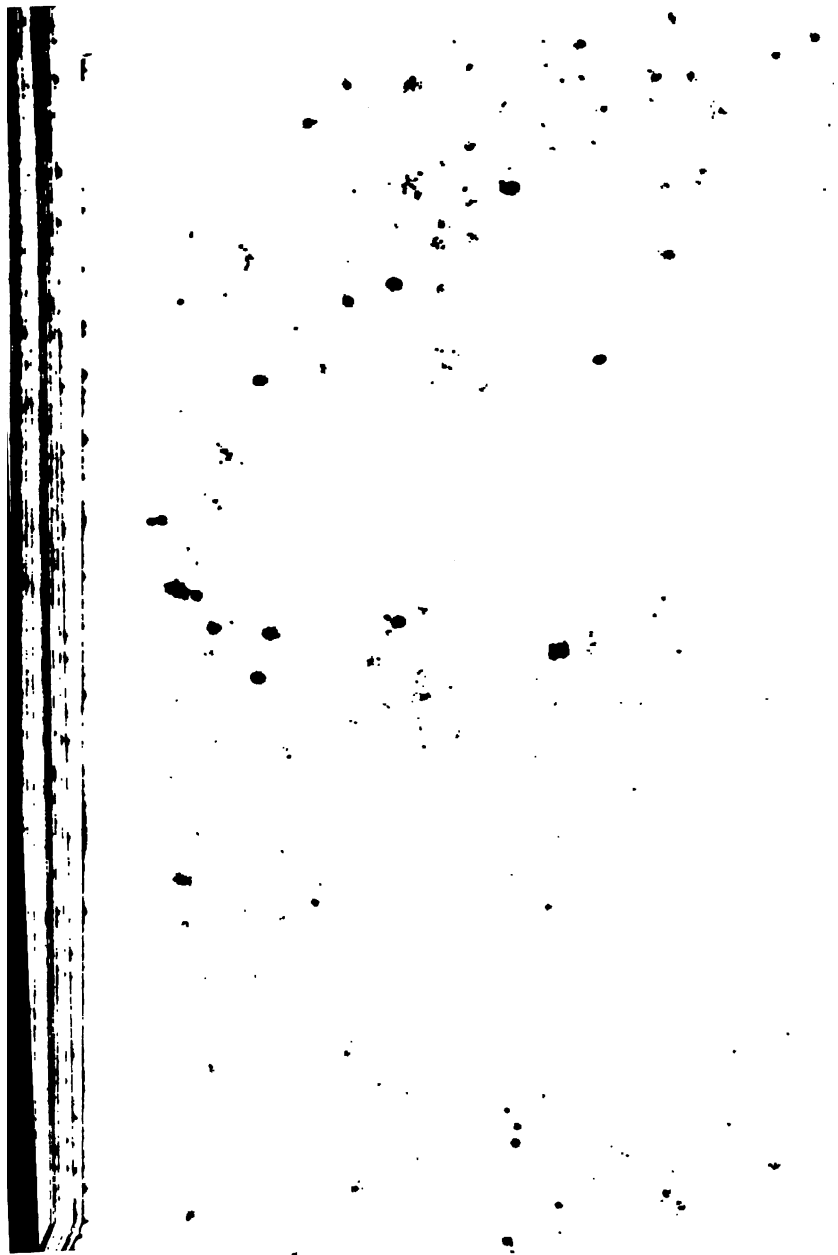
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